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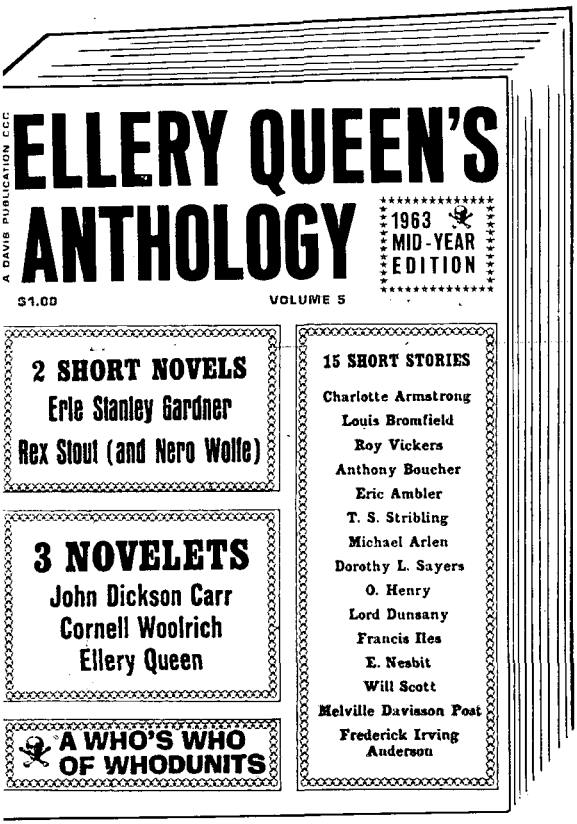

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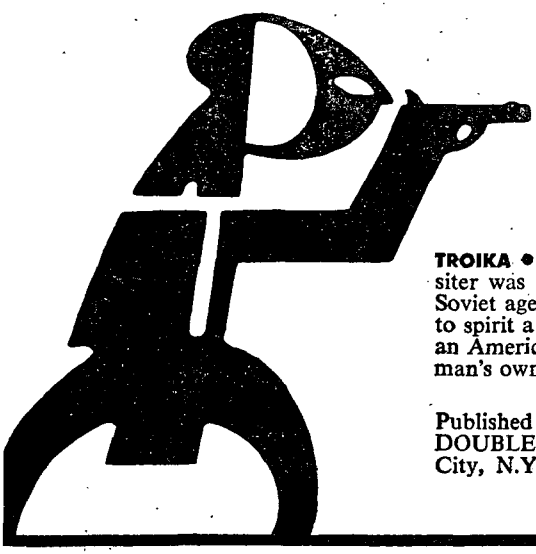

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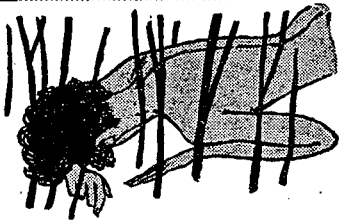

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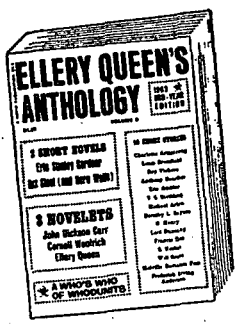

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a new novelette by

HUGH PENTECOST

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: HUGH PENTECOST

TITLE: *In the Middle of Nowhere*

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

LOCALE: Lakeview, U.S.A.

TIME: 1959

COMMENTS: *This story opens with the violence of Nature against Man—and closes with the violence of Man against Man . . . an exciting tale of suspense that might be called a perfect example of "the modern American thriller."*

RAIN BEAT AGAINST THE WINDshield of the Imperial so hard it was as if someone were playing a hose on it from the front. The narrow two-lane road was awash, and it sloshed against the bottom of the car in recurring waves. The thin man at the wheel leaned forward, trying to see anything but water in the beam from the headlights.

"Can't see over ten yards ahead," he said. "Butt me."

The plump man sitting beside the driver fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it with the dashboard lighter. He passed it on to the driver, who sucked smoke deep down into his lungs.

Police and F.B.I. had records on these two men. The thin driver was Ray Stack, with a long background of larceny and assault. The plump one, with an almost baby face, was Perry McVey, wanted for bank robbery and murder. He was classified as one of the most dangerous wanted criminals in the country.

"I've just about had it, Perry," Ray Stack said. "Couldn't we pull up for a little bit? The rain's bound to ease off."

"Why? It hasn't eased off for two days, has it? Any rule says it will ease off if we pull up for a few minutes? You been noticing the streams and brooks we've been crossing? Water right up to bridge level in most cases. We're right in the mid-

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dle of a flood area, kid, and you better pray we get out of it before it closes in on us somewhere. Pull up my foot!"

"It gets worse as we go along," Stack said.

"According to the road map we should be crossing the Massachusetts Turnpike in another ten or fifteen miles. After that we've got some choices depending on how things look. But we got to stick to this route until we cross the turnpike."

The car hit a small pond in the middle of the road. The big motor skipped a beat and then purred on.

"Get water in the distributor and we've had it, brother!" Stack said. He crushed out his cigarette in the dashboard tray and slid it closed.

Suddenly McVey leaned forward, peering through the swirl of rain on the windshield. "Light up ahead —small, moving light."

"Looks like someone waving a torch!" Stack said.

The plump man's lips tightened as he reached for a brief case on the seat beside him. He zipped it open and produced a .45 automatic from its soft leather interior. "Road block!" he said, grimly.

Stack's hands tightened on the wheel. "We talk our way through?"

"Don't be a damn fool," McVey said. "We're not stopping. Not now. By now we're probably famous."

"But, Perry——"

"You sucker!" McVey snarled. "You want to die right here on this stinking country road? Step on it!"

They were almost on top of the waving flashlight. Stack pushed the accelerator to the floor. The big car leaped forward, straight at the frantic torch. For just a moment the headlights picked up the figure of a young man, his mouth opened in a scream. Then the car hit him head on, with all the impact of its three-hundred-odd horsepower.

"Look out!" McVey shouted. "Bridge ahead—covered bridge! Left, Ray! *Left!*"

There was a screech of rubber as the car swung left and dove into what was a dark tunnel—one of the few remaining covered bridges in New England. For a moment the rain was gone.

"He's caught under the car!" Stack said in a shaking voice. "We're dragging him!"

"Keep going!" McVey had swiveled around in the seat and was peering out the back window. "Doesn't seem to be anyone else."

The car jounced as though it had hit a bump in the wood floor of the bridge, and then raced on smoothly. Stack wiped sweat from his face with the sleeve of his coat. "We left him there," he said.

The car burst out of the bridge and into the torrential rain again.

"Pull up!" McVey shouted.

"You crazy?"

"He may not be dead," McVey said. "Pull up. Give me the flashlight out of the glove compartment."

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"It's right in front of you."

Stack had stopped the car. Now he leaned forward, his forehead pressed against the wheel.

McVey, gun in one hand, flashlight in the other, climbed out into the rain. Wind tore at him, sent him zigzagging back along the road toward the covered bridge. The car had gone a good fifty yards past it before it had stopped. McVey had retraced about half the distance, flashlight focused on the mouth of the bridge, when it happened. There was a thunderous roar of water, the noise of splintering timbers, and like a child's toy the covered bridge exploded into a thousand bits and pieces and was swept out of McVey's sight on a tidal wave of water.

McVey sprinted back along the road toward the car. A tail-flick from the mass of water caught him and sent him somersaulting into the ditch beside the road. He managed to scramble to his feet, spitting out water and mud, and staggered for the car. He literally fell into it.

"Get moving!" he shouted. "It's a cloudburst, or something!"

The big car jumped forward. "You see him?" Stack asked, his eyes peering straight ahead.

"He's dead," McVey panted. "Bridge broke up like matchwood. He'll be hamburger when they find him. Nobody'll know what really happened to him. First good break we've had in the last twelve hours!"

"You suppose it was a cop trying to stop us?"

McVey wiped muddy water from his face with his handkerchief. "What difference does it make now? We couldn't take a chance, could we?"

The summer floods of 1955 which turned such Connecticut towns as Winsted, Torrington, and Danbury into National disaster areas, had bypassed the town of Lakeview. On this summer night in 1959 when nightmare floods struck again, Lakeview was prepared for the worst, but again was spared from the heaviest kind of destruction. Power went. Phones went. Cellars filled with water and in some cases cesspools overflowed and carried their filth into the main streets of the town.

But there was no loss of life—or there had been none until the covered bridge at the north-end town line went. When that happened, Lakeview sat dark, water-soaked, and cut off from the outside world. There was no news except that of the flood itself and that news came over the emergency radio channels.

People outside the mainstream of the disaster were being urged to stay put. Travel over state highways was next to impossible. Streams were swollen beyond belief, bridges gone.

"Unless you are in critical danger where you are, stay there! You'll only add to confusion in harder hit areas by leaving whatever shelter you have! Rain and wind are not expected to subside until sometime late tomorrow. Conditions will

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grow worse rather than better. Boil your water. I repeat—boil your water. Do not use water for any purpose whatever without first boiling it. Repeat—do not risk highway travel. Streams have altered their courses. The Governor has declared a state of emergency, but intelligent instructions will not be possible until a survey by air can be made in tomorrow's daylight."

Lakeview was dark, water-soaked, isolated—but without panic. Household radios were useless, but they got the emergency bulletins over car radios. The small civilian defense unit had acted efficiently. A few sick people had been moved to places of greater safety. Stores of food had been taken from the two local grocery stores to the school, which was on high ground.

The town's three doctors had set up a headquarters in the school. As long as daylight had lasted most of the able-bodied men had been helping to herd the dairy cattle from outlying farms, where flood conditions would do the most damage, to high pasture lands nearer the center of the community. Dairy farming was the main business of Lakeview—that and a few fancy black Angus beef farms.

Red Egan, the sheriff, and a group of hastily sworn-in deputies, had gone from house to house with emergency instructions, since telephones and regular radios were out. But most country people own cars and had already heard over the car radios what they should do. They were surprisingly good-humored. Anxiety was mostly for friends and relatives in neighboring towns. Lakeview was proud of itself. They had planned four years ago just what to do if floods came again, and now they had carried out those plans without hysteria or confusion. They would wait till daylight to find out just how bad things were.

At close to midnight the only signs of life were in the very center of the business block on Main Street. The sheriff had parked six cars across Main Street, three facing north and three facing south, rear bumpers to rear bumpers, in a sort of road block. The cars had their parking lights on, but a deputy was stationed in each one, ready to switch on full lights if a car came toward them.

Right next to this blockade of cars was Hector Trimble's drug store. Hector Trimble was a respected and trusted man and a first-rate pharmacist. He kept a modern store and did a good business. But someone had once said that Hector was the kind of pessimist who wore both suspenders and a belt. Suddenly in the flood it had paid off. He had an emergency set for sterilizing and cooking with bottled gas, so that when the power failed he could still make coffee, still sterilize his tubes and retorts, and there were even emergency gas lights in the store.

Things were suddenly wanted

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and it turned out that Hector had an extra supply—"just in case." Hector's twelve-year-old boy Joey ran his legs off carrying messages for the sheriff. Hector's wife, the former Esther Crowder, had—"just in case" —taken a course in practical nursing and was helping the three doctors with patients who would have been removed to the hospital if there had been any way to get them there.

And there was Uncle George Crowder.

George Crowder was a character, even by country standards. He came from one of the oldest and best families in town. He had started out in life like a ball of fire, gone to the State University, graduated with honors from law school, and had quickly become the County Attorney. People said in those days that George Crowder would most likely find himself in the Governor's mansion some day. It never came about for a special reason. George Crowder had prosecuted a murder case in the county, got his conviction, and sent the victim to the chair. Then a year later a confession and corroborative evidence proved the executed man had been innocent.

The next day George Crowder closed his law office and disappeared from Lakeview. When he came back, twenty years later, he was a changed man. Some said he'd drunk his way through his money and had to come back to be supported by his sister, Hector Trimble's wife.

At any rate, he built himself a little shack in the woods a couple of miles from town. He lived there alone with his setter dog, Timmy. In his mid-fifties he was tough as rawhide, had a keen, dry wit, was one of the best woodsmen the town had ever known and certainly Lakeview's best shot with a rifle or shotgun. Uncle George, however, was a sort of cross Hector Trimble had to bear. He was, by Hector's rules, a shiftless do-nothing and a very bad influence on young Joey, who idolized his uncle, and spent every free hour he had with the old man and his dog in the woods.

On the night of the flood, with midnight closing in, Hector Trimble and Joey and Uncle George were in the drug store with Janet Graves, the eighth-grade schoolteacher who helped out in the store during the busy summer months. They were having coffee—all except Joey who was sucking a coke through a double straw. If there was any one person who threatened Joey's undivided loyalty to Uncle George, it was Janet Graves. This was Joey's first serious affair of the heart. "And showing mighty good taste very early in the parade," Uncle George told his sister. "If I was a few years younger——"

Just before midnight, headlights appeared at the north end of Main Street, fuzzy-bright in the rain. No one would be out traveling this time of night unless it was an emergency. Uncle George slid off his stool at

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the counter and buttoned his oilskin up around his neck. Joey, automatically prepared to follow, glanced at Janet Graves. She smiled at him, a smile as warm as the red color of her hair. Strange lumps bobbed up and down in Joey's stomach. They made him too weak to go with Uncle George.

As the headlights appeared at the far end of the street, the three cars Sheriff Egan had facing north turned on their lights full.

You couldn't run through or over that kind of block, so the big Imperial slowed down and came to a stop. Sheriff Egan went around to the driver's side. He looked at the tense, white face of Ray Stack at the wheel and the pudgy smiling face of Perry McVey, who seemed to be reaching into a leather brief case for something.

"You're strangers!" Red Egan said, as if he couldn't believe it.

"Yes," Ray Stack said. "Headed for New York—and in a great hurry, if you don't mind."

The sheriff gave him a friendly grin. "I don't mind, Mister, but it ain't goin' to make much difference one way or another. No way for you to get there. Not tonight—not for the next day or two, maybe. What's itchin' me is how you got here in the first place. No way to get out, no way to get in."

"We came along Route 21," McVey said.

"Across the covered bridge?" Egan asked.

"Yes."

"I'd of sworn it was gone by now," Egan said. "And I've sworn it wouldn't have taken that car of yours for the last five-six hours. Didn't our man stop you?"

"You mean the fellow with the flashlight?" Stack asked.

The light from the car dashboard was too dim for Egan to notice the murderous glint in McVey's small eyes as his head swiveled toward his partner.

"Yes, he stopped us," McVey said quickly. "But we decided to risk it. I'm afraid we got bad news about your man, though. Just after we got across the bridge the whole thing went, and your guy was right at the mouth of the bridge. Like a tidal wave—took him and the bridge, and damn near took us, fifty yards away!"

A nerve twitched in Egan's cheek. "It's a miracle you got across. But now you're here, Mister, you're here to stay. No way in God's world to get out." He turned toward the man with the deeply lined face who had come up beside him. "Russ Toomey's gone, George," he said. "Washed away with the bridge."

"I heard," Uncle George Crowder said, pain in his pale blue eyes. He peered in the car at Stack and McVey. "You're dead sure he went with the bridge?"

"Saw it with my own eyes," McVey said. "He's a goner, all right. Tossed him fifty feet in the air. Tough luck."

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"Somebody'll have to tell his old lady," Uncle George said. "It's gonna cut Joey up pretty bad, too. He and Russ were good friends."

"You fellows better go in the drug store and have a cup of hot coffee," Egan said.

"We've got to get on," McVey said.

"I wouldn't kid you, Mister. You can't. That old covered bridge was the last way in or out, and we wrote that off hours ago. That's why we sent Russ out there. You're just dog lucky you got across, Mister. Now you pull up to the curb there and have yourself a cup of coffee. Hec Trimble's got a radio in there and you can hear the emergency reports for yourself. There's no traveling in this neck of the woods—not till morning when they've seen what they're up against and put some emergency crews to work."

McVey and Stack stared at each other. "I guess a cup of coffee would taste good," McVey said.

They pulled the Imperial over to the curb and got out, McVey carrying his brief case, the flap unzipped.

"In here's the coffee," Uncle George said, leading the way into the drug store.

Hector was back of the counter with Janet Graves. She was washing some coffee cups. Young Joey, sitting on the stool at the front end of the counter, turned around to see what was what.

"These gentlemen are the last ones in or out," Uncle George said. "Covered bridge is gone—they saw it go." He put a strong brown hand gently on Joey's shoulder. "And they got bad news."

"Coffee, gentlemen?" Hector asked in his crisp voice.

"Yeah, thanks," Stack said. He looked at Janet Graves and moistened his lips.

"Bad news, Mr. Crowder?" Janet asked.

The brown hand moved around Joey's shoulder. "Russ Toomey went with the bridge," he said. "He warned these gentlemen off and they decided to risk it anyway. Right afterwards the bridge went—and Russ with it."

Tears welled up into Joey Trimble's eyes. "Poor Russ," he said in a small voice. "But—but he was doin' his job. He'd have liked it that way." Joey struggled with his tears.

"This Toomey boy was a great friend of Joey's," Janet said in a gentle explanation to McVey. "He was maybe twenty years old, but he and Joey were real close."

"Well, you can be proud of him, son," McVey said to Joey with an air of kindliness. "Like you say, he did his job. He stopped us. He warned us about the bridge. We said we'd try it. He argued with us and argued with us, but we went ahead anyway. Then, right after that—pow! The whole works went."

Joey turned quickly to McVey. "He argued with you?"

McVey nodded. "Told us over

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and over the bridge wouldn't hold us, but we had to risk it. Had to get to New York. Still do."

Joey's eyes were very bright. Then it couldn't have been Russ!" he cried.

"Of course it was Russ," Hector said. "Russ is the one Egan sent to the covered bridge. Everyone else is accounted for."

"But it couldn't have been Russ!" Joey protested. "Don't you see—?"

"Joey!" Uncle George said sharply. His pale eyes were suddenly as cold as two newly minted dimes.

"But it *couldn't* have been Russ!" Joey persisted. He smiled happily at McVey. "Russ couldn't have argued with you, Mister, because he's deaf and dumb!"

There was a deathly silence in the little store. McVey's pudgy hand reached for the brief case he'd put down on the stool beside him. Joey, sensing something wrong, still couldn't stop the flow of his relief.

"So it couldn't have been Russ!" he explained again.

Uncle George turned slowly away toward the door.

"Hold it a minute, Pop," McVey said in a new voice, a hard, cold voice. He'd taken the .45 from the brief case. He didn't point it at Uncle George. The round, chill barrel was pressed against Joey's head just above the left ear. "Before anyone goes anywhere let's just get the facts straightened out here, shall we?"

Hector Trimble stared at his young son, McVey's .45 held against his head; at McVey, whose round chubby face was suddenly a mask of smiling evil; at Ray Stack, who had moved around and taken a second gun out of the open brief case; at Uncle George Crowder, who stood by the door, tall, gray-faced, and motionless as a statue; and at Janet Graves, her pallor accentuated by the dark red halo of her hair.

Hector exploded. "What kind of melodramatic nonsense is this?" he demanded. "Put away those silly guns. We're all too tired after what's happened today to—"

"Just stand still, Dad," McVey said with a smile that made Hector feel queazy, "and have a rag ready to mop up this kid's brains off the counter in case anybody moves until I say so."

"You were sore because I just mentioned the guy with a flashlight!" Ray Stack said in a cracked-sounding voice. "Then *you* have to go invent a whole story about an argument when it turns out the guy can't even talk!"

"Shut up," McVey said. He nodded his head toward the radio on the counter. "That thing work?"

Hector moistened his lips. "It's a battery set I keep—just in case—" he said.

"You can get news about the flood on it?"

"Only thing you c-can get," Hector said. "Conelrad station. All the network programs are off."

"Tune it in." McVey's piglike eyes

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darted toward Janet. "Just keep your hands up on top of the counter where I can see 'em, sister. Ray, have a look around back of the counters. Sometimes in a hick store like this they keep a gun in back. Might be a holdup or something." He gave Hector a wider smile. "And you lock up, Dad. I don't want anyone coming in here to pass the time of day while we talk."

"But I promised the sheriff I'd——"

"Un-promise him—and quick!" McVey said.

Uncle George's voice broke in sharply. "Don't move, Joey!" He'd seen something on the boy's face that warned him Joey was thinking in terms of romantic heroism.

"Now there is a guy knows the time of day," McVey said. "You do like he said, boy. Don't move! You! I said turn on the radio."

There was a sputtering noise as the battery set warmed up.

"—Change until late tomorrow morning. High water levels have probably not been reached as yet. Again authorities warn against any attempt at highway travel. It is not simply that it is dangerous, but there is probably not a bridge left in the northwest corner of the state. If you are safe where you are, sit tight. Boil your water. Repeat—Boil your water. In the Hartford area—"

McVey reached forward with his left hand and cut off the machine. "Aren't they reporting any other kind of news?"

"You mean like an account of your particular crime?" Uncle George asked in a flat voice.

"You're a pretty wise old fossil," McVey said.

"My Uncle George isn't an old fossil!" Joey said in a shaky voice. "He's the best lawyer in the State, and he'll——"

"Lawyer, eh?" McVey said. "Well, explain to them, Uncle, that you go to the chair for one killing, so it don't matter how many more you add to it."

"What did you do, run Russ Toomey down?" Uncle George asked. "Think he was a police road block or something?"

"A real wise old fossil," McVey said. "So now get practical, Uncle. There has to be some way out of this godforsaken burg and one of you here better know it. If we can't get out by car there has to be a way to walk out. If that's the way it is Ray and me are going to walk out, see—with the kid! Because we don't want you two characters or the doll here to be doing any talking. So we take the boy, and maybe, if we get away, we send him back."

"You can't take Joey!" Hector said. "That'd be kidnaping."

"You amaze me," McVey said. "What about it, Ray?"

"No gun," Stack said—he had finished his behind-the-counter search.

"Now let's talk very rapid turkey," McVey said. "How do we get away from this town?"

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"Lakeview is in a valley between two ranges of hills," Uncle George said. "You came in one end of it. You know there's no way out there. The other end is worse—river winds in and out across the highway. Right now the whole south end of the valley is a lake. Unless you're a first-class channel swimmer—"

"Never mind the comedy," McVey said. "So we can't go out either end. So we walk out over one of the ranges of hills."

Uncle George snorted. "In this kind of a rainstorm and in pitch darkness?"

"If someone smart showed us the way," McVey said.

"I bet even Uncle George couldn't take you out on a night like this," Joey said, holding his head quite still, "and he knows the woods better'n anyone in Lakeview!"

A dry smile twisted Uncle George's face. "Don't you figure you've done just about enough talking for one night, Joey?"

McVey chuckled. "Helpful kid. So Uncle George is the top guy in the woods around here. So you take us out along with the kid, Uncle George. And we start now, quick, before someone gets thirsty for a cup of coffee and we really have to get rough."

Janet Graves turned to Uncle George. "You can't let them do this, Mr. Crowder. You can't help them to do it."

Uncle George turned his cold blue eyes to the schoolteacher. "I've come across a few genuine killers in my time, Janet," he said. "I've seen a rattlesnake coiled to strike. I've seen a wildcat crouched to spring off a rock ledge over my head. There's times when you move against 'em, and times when you don't. I'm afraid I think our fat friend here means business. Unfortunately, he's got his gun on Joey and not on me. I wouldn't mind taking a slug or two to bring Red and the boys in from outside. But not Joey or you or Hector." He turned back to McVey. "I'm going to tell you the truth," he said.

"Make it snappy," McVey said.

"I'm not sure I can take you out. Streams coming down the mountain may have cut off trails. And one thing is certain. We wouldn't have a chance without showing a light or two. And lights moving in the woods will bring the sheriff and some of his deputies to see what's wrong."

"Fix it so they don't," McVey said.

"How?"

"Tell them we've offered to pay you well to take us out."

"And how do I explain taking Joey along?" Uncle George asked.

McVey grinned. "For the adventure of it!" he said. "Boys are strong for adventure, aren't they, Joey?" The smile went out like blown light bulb. "And right now, Uncle," he said. "Every minute we wait somebody's going to come in here and knock things end-wise."

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Uncle George sighed. He was flexing his fingers nervously. "We'll need some pure water in your camp canteen, Joey. Maybe Miss Graves'll make a few sandwiches. We won't get out the other side till tomorrow afternoon, even if we don't have any trouble."

"I'll get my camping kit out of my room," Joey said.

"You'll sit right where you are, Joey," McVey said. "Let the tootsie get the stuff. You, Ray. You go out with Uncle George while he breaks the news to the sheriff."

"We'll need extra flashlights," Uncle George said. "You got some in stock, haven't you, Hector?"

Hector nodded, dumbly, eyes on his son—and on the .45 held so close to the boy's head.

"I'm giving you just five minutes, Uncle, to clear things with the sheriff. Then I'll know you've made a wrong move and little Joey gets it. Clear?"

"Clear," Uncle George said. He looked at the boy and spoke gently, but his hands were still nervous. "You keep your mouth shut, Joey. Don't say a word—not a word. I'll be back inside the five minutes."

"Leave your gun here, Ray," McVey said. "I'll hold 'em both. Don't want anyone bumping into you or suspecting anything. And keep one thing clear in your head, Uncle. I won't do anything to try to help Ray or myself without first pulling the trigger on this kid. Clear?"

"Clear," Uncle George said.

He turned and walked out the door, Stack at his elbow. The street was dark except for the parking lights of the cars that Egan had parked across the road. It was noisy outside, wind roaring down the narrow street, and behind it the distant thunder of angry waters.

When Uncle George rapped on the window of the first parked car, Egan rolled down the glass and looked out.

"These two gents are real anxious to be on the move," Uncle George said casually. "They got a big deal on in New York. They've offered me quite a nice hunk of change if I'd guide 'em out over the west ridge into New York State."

Red stared at Uncle George as though he was crazy. "Over the west ridge—?"

"We might make it," Uncle George said. His voice was outwardly calm but his hands, still working, seemed to show his inner anxiety. "Over on the other side things might be so they could get to the railway. We can't do worse than get lost for a while. I figure if we go south down the road a piece till we come to where Hyland Brook has overflowed we could follow the stream up past the Devil's Slide to its source. That'd bring us pretty near the top of the Ridge. Be daylight by then and we shouldn't have any trouble getting down into New York State on the other side."

"Sounds crazy," Sheriff Egan said.

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"Well, Joey and me are going to try it anyway. Didn't want you worrying if you saw lights moving around up in the woods."

"Joey!" Egan cried. "You're taking the kid!"

"Shucks, he'll get a kick out of it," Uncle George said. "Chance to use that new camp kit you gave him."

The Sheriff opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. "I think you're all crazy!" he said. "I expect we'll see you all trekkin' back here by daylight for some grub."

"Like to get the gentlemen's car out so we can head south toward Hyland Brook," Uncle George said.

"Yeah," Egan said. "Sure."

Uncle George turned and walked back into the store, Stack still a half step behind him.

"All smooth as pie," Stack told McVey.

"We'll go south in your car as far as we can," Uncle George said to McVey. He looked at the counter where Joey's canteen and a camp roll lay. Janet Graves, her eyes wide as saucers, said there were some sandwiches in the roll.

"I want a piece of rope or clothesline," McVey said. "The boy'll walk right alongside me to the car. But once we start climbing—well, we'll tie an end of rope around him and the other end around me. Like mountain climbers, eh, Joey? And if you try any tricks I'll just yank you back to me and blow your brains out. Clear?"

Hector Trimble, his face the color of ashes, gripped the edge of the counter for support.

"Please! Please don't hurt the boy!" he whispered.

McVey gave him an almost angelic smile. "Entirely up to Uncle George, Dad. Entirely up to him," he said.

Hector told Janet Graves to get a roll of clothesline—they sell everything in drug stores nowadays. Uncle George picked up the camp roll and slipped his arms through the straps so that he carried it on his shoulders like a knapsack. He handed the water canteen to Stack.

"You better carry this, Mister," he said, "and carry it real good. We may need it bad before we're through."

McVey took the coil of clothesline Janet brought and slipped it into the brief case. "One last word before we go," he said. "For you, Dad, and Miss Janet here. You may get the idea of running out and telling the sheriff the whole story once we're gone. I advise against it. Because I'm telling you, Dad. We see any signs of being followed, or we suddenly walk into anything looks like a trap, and we take care of Junior before we bother to ask any questions. Clear?"

"Clear," Uncle George said—it was a word he was forced to keep repeating. He stood by the door, his face like stone but his hands moving restlessly as though he were now impatient to be off. Janet

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Graves stared at him, disbelief in her wide eyes.

McVey took Joey by the shoulder and gave him a little shove toward Ray Stack. "You walk along with Ray, Junior. You and Uncle'll ride in front with him. I'll walk right behind you to the car, and I'll sit in the back seat behind the two of you, and all the time this gun'll be aimed right at the back of your head. Now—march!"

Joey gave Hector and Janet a confident little smile, and then he went out into the night with the two men and Uncle George. The big Imperial had been moved through the blockade of cars and was headed south. Sheriff Egan stood by the driver's side, rain lashing against his leathery face. He squinted at Uncle George.

"You still figure on going south to Hyland Brook and over the west ridge into New York State?" he asked.

"You got a better idea?" Uncle George asked.

"Nope," Egan said laconically. "I still think you're all nuts. You won't be able to follow any trail in the dark, George. Trees down, brooks runnin' out of their courses. You're just wastin' time to start before daylight."

"The gain of an hour or two might mean everything to our business deal," McVey said pleasantly. He stood close to Joey. "I understand Mr. Crowder knows these woods inside out."

"He's the best," the sheriff said. "But sometimes even the best can't do the impossible."

"I think we ought to get started," McVey said with an apologetic smile.

Stack got in behind the wheel. Joey, Uncle George, and McVey walked around to the other side of the car. The old man and the boy got in front and McVey climbed into the rear seat. The doors were closed. The motor hummed.

"Good luck!" Egan called out above the noise of the storm.

"So far so good," McVey said, looking out the rear window. "You played that nice and casual, Uncle."

Uncle George sat wedged in a corner of the seat, his gnarled fingers clenching and unclenching in his lap. In the faint light from the instrument panel Joey stared at his uncle, as though hoping for some magic trick to emerge from behind the scowling forehead.

"You may not be able to go more'n a mile or so down this road before we hit pretty deep water," Uncle George said. "But I figured all the walking we could save—" His voice faded off.

A few moments later the car slowed down. "Looks like a lake up ahead," Stack said, peering ahead through the space in the windshield cut by the lashing wiper blade.

"I guess this is about it," Uncle George said. "That'll be the overflow of Hyland Brook. Better pull up over to the side here, Mister."

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The car stopped. McVey's orders were precise. He and Joey and Uncle George would move out and stand in front of the car in the headlight glow. Stack would keep them covered while McVey tied the clothesline to Joey and himself.

Presently, each of them equipped with a flashlight, they started off across a muddy field, following the side of the flooded brook. Uncle George led the way, with Joey behind him. The imprisoning rope trailed back to where it was lashed around McVey's pudgy midsection. Stack brought up the rear.

The violence of Nature against Man in these periodic eruptions is terrifying and costly beyond an accountant's ability to totalize. But Man, hiding in the securest place he can find, is seldom a witness to the awful damage that Nature inflicts upon herself in these moments of convulsion. Three men and a boy struggled slowly up the first gradual rise of the west ridge, and they saw trees uprooted, boulders laid bare, great jagged ditches dug in the earth by angry waters.

With only the flashlights to see by, they came suddenly to an impasse and had to scout blindly, through the wind and rain-swept darkness, for a way around. They fell, scrambled up, fell again—the drive for escape still strong in McVey and Stack. Uncle George, like a gaunt, bent tree, moved steadily and slowly, always up. Occasionally he would reach back to help Joey.

The noise of the storm seemed to grow louder. McVey yanked on the rope and signaled Joey that he wanted to talk to Uncle George. The four of them huddled together. McVey had Joey by the arm, the gun held firmly against his ribs.

"Sounds like a waterfall!" he shouted at Uncle George.

The older man nodded. "Called the Devil's Slide. We want to stay as close to the edge of the stream as we can here. Otherwise we'll have to take a big circle around. Cost us a lot of time. Once we get above the falls the going should be easier. But stay right behind me. You don't want to lose your footing in this next bit." He looked down at Joey. "Getting tired, old-timer?"

"I'm fine," Joey said, a little breathless.

They started up again. The stream to their left was an angry torrent, and straight ahead of them the water thundered over the Devil's Slide. The climb was steep now. McVey kept turning his flashlight from the boy to Uncle George ahead of him.

They were halfway up the side of the foam-lashed falls when Uncle George seemed to lose his footing. Even over the noise of wind and water they could hear him shout. He staggered to the left, arms flung out to save himself, then pitched headfirst into the boiling falls.

McVey, gasping for breath, scrambled up beside Joey who crouched on the edge of the falls,

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shining his flashlight down into the murderous water, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Uncle George! *Uncle George!*"

The two men were silent, shaken by the suddenness of it. Stack turned his flash around. "We better move," he said, licking his lips. "You can see where the bank's undermined here in spots. It gave way with the old guy right here."

"Come on, let's get away from the edge," McVey said. He yanked on the rope that was attached to Joey, pulling the dazed boy away from the falls.

"We gotta try to find him!" Joey wailed.

"You crazy?" Stack said. "Nobody could live through that. He's already pounded to death on the rocks." He looked at McVey. "So now what?"

McVey shone his flashlight on Joey's white, fear-struck face. "It looks like it's up to you, Junior," he said grimly. "You know these woods, don't you? Been out here with the old boy before, haven't you?"

Joey nodded, as though he only half heard.

"Your uncle said there was a way around the falls. Longer, he said, but it's probably a damn sight safer. You know the way?"

"There's an old logging road," Joey said. "I—I think I could find it from here."

"You better," McVey growled. "I'm warning you, sonny-boy, you try to pull one on us and I go back after your old man and your old woman, and that pretty teacher—"

"I—I think I can find it," Joey said in a shaken voice.

"So—get started!"

For half an hour they floundered around in brush and fallen tree limbs. Suddenly Joey turned, pointing with his flashlight. "Old logging road. You can see it," he said to McVey.

They moved with greater ease now. The road was rough, but there was no obstacle of undergrowth.

"Even if it is longer we can move faster," McVey said to Stack. He gave a little jerk on the rope and gestured to Joey to speed it up.

And then things happened so suddenly that McVey had no chance to act.

Directly in front of them the headlights of a car sprang into light. At the same instant Joey plunged forward, flat on his face. McVey had only a fleeting glimpse of the figure that stepped into the beam of light ahead of them—the dripping figure of Uncle George. He had raised a rifle to his shoulder and quite methodically he pulled the trigger. McVey's body jerked upward like a marionette on strings, then pitched sideways into the darkness. There was a round black hole in the center of his forehead.

Uncle George turned the gun slightly to the left.

"No!" Stack screamed. "Don't shoot!" He swung his arm and

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threw the .45 he was carrying into the underbrush. "Don't shoot!"

"Hold it, George!" another voice said. "We need him to do some talking." Sheriff Egan stepped forward into the light, a shotgun cradled in his arm. "You hold dead still, brother, unless you want a double load in your gut!"

Uncle George took three quick steps to the fallen boy and knelt beside him, cradling him in his arms.

"You did fine, boy," he said unsteadily. "You did just fine!"

It was all Joey could do to keep awake. His mother had given him two aspirins and a cup of hot tea. He was wrapped in blankets, and the heat from the kitchen range made him so drowsy that he felt his head drooping and he had to fight to listen.

Joey's mother and father, and Uncle George, and Sheriff Egan and the lovely Miss Graves were all there. They had all made a great fuss over Joey. Miss Graves had actually kissed him. His mother kept telling him he ought to get to bed, but she smiled at him gently and didn't press the point.

"These guys knocked over a diamond merchant in Montreal," the sheriff was saying. "Killed him and got away with about a half a million dollars in stones. Had 'em in that brief case all the time! They figured they could drive away at night—and ran right into the flood. When they saw Russ Toomey waving his torch at 'em they thought it was a police road block and they deliberately ran him down."

"I still don't understand the rest of it, Mr. Egan," Esther Trimble said. "How did you know to go to George's shack in the woods? And how did Joey know what to do?"

"It's George's story," Egan said.

Uncle George chuckled, and his pale blue eyes moved affectionately to Joey, who smiled back sleepily. "Fellow with a gun always figures he's stronger than the fellow he's covering," Uncle George said. "And he usually thinks he knows more than the poor sucker who's looking into his gun barrel. That was McVey. He fell into a trap when he made that up about arguing with Russ Toomey, but he was still top man—the smartest guy on earth. We didn't have any choice, it seemed, but to do just what he said—not with that gun pointed at Joey's head! But we weren't entirely licked."

"I'll say!" Red Egan chuckled. He was sitting next to Janet Graves and Joey guessed she must be too interested in the story to notice that the sheriff's hand was resting against hers.

"I tipped Red off right away there was trouble," Uncle George said. "Told him I was heading 'south to Hyland Brook.' Hyland Brook is north of here in the next county! I told him I was going to take these fellows over the west ridge into New York State. Red knew as well

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as I did that if we went over the west ridge we'd wind up in Massachusetts. Told him we were taking a camp kit he'd given Joey—which he never gave him. Mistake after mistake that the two strangers couldn't suspect—so Red knew there was trouble, and he also knew enough to let me play in my way!"

"Always let you play it your way, George."

"Then I told Miss Graves here to tell Red to meet me at my shack in the woods and stay under cover till he heard from me."

"How could you tell her?" Hector interrupted. "You were never out of McVey's sight—or the other fellow's."

"There were three people in this town who made friends with Russ Toomey," Uncle George said. "There was Joey, first and best, and me, and Miss Graves, who tried to teach the poor deaf and dumb boy a little on the side. So we learned to talk his way—*with our hands!* I stood at the door with McVey staring right at me and told Miss Graves with my hands what to tell Red. And then in the car I told Joey what was up—the same way. You remember the Devil's Slide, Esther—when we were kids? Water comes over the falls—overhang up top. At the bottom there's a pool hid right behind the water coming over the falls. I told Joey I was going to dive in there. They wouldn't be able to see me through the overflow—not in the dark with only flashlights. Then Joey was to stall a while and finally lead 'em along the logging road to my shack."

"You were taking a pretty big gamble with Joey's life," Hector Trimble sputtered.

Uncle George's face was grave. "Yes, I was, Hector. But don't think for a minute McVey was going to let us go after we'd served his purpose. He'd have left us both in the woods—dead. Had to take a chance. So while Joey was leading 'em around in the woods I lit out for the shack. Red was there, and we parked his Jeep heading straight up the road. I'd told Joey the minute the headlights came on he was to dive flat on his face."

"You told him that—with your hands?" Esther Trimble said.

"Right in the car—right in front of Stack. You might say Russ Toomey brought his own killers to justice," Uncle George said.

"But weren't you scared, Joey?" Esther asked. "Weren't you scared maybe George hadn't made it back from the falls? Joey?"

Uncle George looked tenderly at the boy. "I guess we could all do with a little sleep," he said.

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a new Minerva Club story

EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	VICTOR CANNING
TITLE:	*Flint's Diamonds*
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*As promised last month, here is the second in a new series—how the members of the Minerva Club came to the rescue of Flint Morrish in his terrible predicament . . .*

THE MINERVA CLUB—OF WHICH most people have never heard—is in a turning off Brook Street which, as you probably know, is very handy for the Ritz. It is a very exclusive club, chiefly because its membership is restricted to those who have served at least a two years' prison sentence and are able—beg, borrow, or steal—to pay yearly dues of £50.

Outside the club, the members are free to carry on their professional activities without any fear of being expelled—no matter what trouble they get into. But inside, there is nothing but good manners and the most honorable behavior. You could leave your wallet on the edge of a hand basin and find it there a month later. In other words, it is an oasis of tranquillity after the cut-and-thrust of the outside world where every man is for himself. The membership includes some distinguished names from the criminal calendar—Milky Waye, the Club's Secretary; Solly Badrubal, Chairman of the Wines Committee; Jim O'Leary, Treasurer—others including Horace Head, Marty Martin, Dig Sopwith—dozens of them. And Flint Morrish.

This story is about Flint. He was one of the nicest men ever to have done time. He had a wooden leg—the result of something that went wrong with the gelignite in an early safe job; he had a beaming country-squire kind of face and an incurable faith in human nature—particularly in the female side of it.

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Flint was always looking for the perfect woman—and always being disappointed. In romantic affairs he was as short-sighted as his own eyes—and he did nothing about either defect. He wouldn't wear glasses and he wouldn't learn by experience.

His latest "little number" was a blonde perfection, weighing about a hundred and ten pounds, somewhat top-heavy in her physical distribution, and with a pair of blue eyes that were like sultry lagoon-pools. She came into the ring listed as Lottie Larson, age twenty-eight (unsubstantiated by any birth certificate). And Flint was gone on her. For him she was *the* woman, and for her he was *the* man—as soon as he could, no matter how, produce a properly authenticated bank balance of £10,000.

At the time of this story, Flint had about £5,000—which was high for him—and he was working on the balance. In fact, although he had taken Lottie on holiday to a small seaport town in Hampshire called Brankfold, Flint never missed a chance to pursue his calling—Flint was a man who always had both eyes open for the slightest tip of the head from Opportunity.

One day, driving by himself—Lottie had stayed in the hotel with an headache—he passed a large country house just in time to see a man and a woman and two children drive out of the main gates. Flint stopped up the road and then wandered back to the house. He went round to the servants' entrance and knocked. If there had been any reply he would have tried to sell the cook a complete set of the *Child's Wonder Book of Nature*, £14, delivered by post as soon as the check was cleared . . . But there was no answer to his knock.

So Flint went into the house through a convenient window, and wasting no time on reconnaissance he quickly found the study and the safe. It was a laughable safe to a man of Flint's experience. He opened it up with a collapsible jimmy (which he always carried with him), and found himself with about £50 in notes and a small wash-leather bag of uncut diamonds. At a quick and happy glance he knew the diamonds would be worth about £20,000 from any fence.

Flint drove back to his hotel whistling and found that Lottie, according to the hall porter, had recovered from her headache and gone off to the Pier Ballroom to a tea dance. Now Flint, because of his wooden leg, was not much of a dancing man. However, for Lottie's sake, he did his best. So he went after her, eager to show her the bag of diamonds.

Squinting around the ballroom, he finally picked out her blonde top-knot. She was dancing with a man who, as far as Flint could see, was just a tall length of Donegal tweed with a black thatch on top.

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Flint pushed his way across to them on the floor and took Lottie by the arm. It should be mentioned here that Flint was by nature a very jealous man where his "perfect women" were concerned—even though Flint knew that there were some limits to perfection.

Very politely Flint said, "Excuse me, the lady is tired," and started to lead his beloved away. But the face under the black thatch said to Flint, "The lady is not tired and is enjoying this dance with me. Stump off, you old pirate."

Now this was a most unfortunate thing to say to Flint. Flint didn't mind a bit being ribbed about his leg by members of the Minerva Club—but for any nonmember even to show he had noticed it, let alone draw a crude allusion to it, was like putting a match to a powder keg.

Flint let go a roundhouse and put the man on the floor; but the man jumped up to an accompaniment of shrieks from the dancers and a drum roll from the band, and flashed over a quick right cross to Flint's jaw that dropped him to the floor as if he'd been shot. After that there was a few minutes of sharp give-and-take, during which Lottie disappeared, and then the police arrived. Flint and the other man were hauled off to the local police station —charge, disturbance of the peace.

Now on the way to the station Flint did some quick thinking. He knew that he would be up before the beak the next morning and he knew that with his record he would get at least a month—while the other fellow, such is justice, pleading he had been assaulted, would probably get off scot-free. The thought of a month didn't worry Flint much. In his profession the calendar was always coming up with such temporary blanks—but, of course, he was worried about the diamonds.

At the police station he was bound to be searched and his belongings taken. In the end Flint did what any intelligent monkey would have done: he pouched the small washleather bag inside his mouth up against his right cheek and all through the journey he sat with his hand against his face as though he had got a swollen jaw in the fight.

It worked in front of the desk sergeant. Flint was relieved of all his possessions and went mumbling into the detention cell.

The next morning he appeared before the judge and tried to mumble his way out of the charge against him. Maybe, if Flint could have spoken up clearly, the beak would have given him only a month; but the beak was a bit deaf and Flint's mumbles, though each one was over twenty carats in value, merely irritated him. Flint got a sentence of two months, and the other man was discharged.

Now the jail at Brankfold was a small one, adjoining the Chief Constable's house—all one building, in fact. There were only eight cells,

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and business in Brankfold was never enough to fill them all. Flint was given a top-floor cell with a view of the sky and nothing to look forward to except visiting day when he knew that Lottie would be around.

Flint was aware, of course, that while he had got away with the swollen-face gambit, he could not keep it up for two months. Fat jaws just do not last that long and somebody would get suspicious. So he decided to unpouch the diamonds, hide them, and only pouch them again on the day he left jail.

Being a man of resource, he proceeded to unravel enough thread from his bed mattress to make a length of string. He tied the washleather bag to it, stood on his bed, and lowered the diamonds through the grille of the ventilator up in the corner near the ceiling, tying the other end of the string neatly and inconspicuously to the grille frame. Then he settled down patiently to do his two months. Sixty days and he would be out—with scads of money in the bank—and Lottie—and bliss forevermore.

On the first visiting day he told Lottie about the diamonds and about the splendid future that lay before them. Her eyes turned to limpid pools which promised exotic delights. She began to describe the kind of house she would like to live in, and the color she already fancied for the dining-room curtains.

Flint congratulated himself on his good taste in falling for a woman who was not only beautiful and shapely but such a magnificent home builder. The idea of home, it must be mentioned, was something very dear to Flint since he had never had one, having been found in a railway carriage when he was three and having flitted from then on through various institutions and remand homes to Borstal and, finally—the crowning achievement of his career—five years in Dartmoor. Yes, Flint was all for a home of his own—with his perfect woman.

But the next week, when Solly Badrubal came to see him, he was a bit shaken.

"To tell a woman you have a packet of diamonds stashed away is folly, Flint—sheer folly. She could sell you out just for the reward she could get for the return of stolen property."

"Not Lottie—there is no such baseness in my Lottie."

"Then she's no woman."

"That," said Flint firmly, "is something I know to be untrue. Don't you worry about Lottie. Just you get hold of a good fence and tell him I'm coming out with a packet and to have the money ready. I don't want any delay in getting off on my honeymoon. Lottie is all for the Bahamas. She is going up to London next week to choose her outfit."

Well, all might have been smooth sailing. Lottie could have gone to

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the Bahamas with Flint, they could have been happy for as long as the money lasted—which is as much as any reasonable person can expect—but things went wrong.

At the end of the first month there was a fire in the kitchen quarters of the jail, and these were directly under Flint's cell. He woke up one night to find his cell full of smoke, the floorboards like a hot plate, and before he could do anything, a couple of officious guards had come in and rescued him.

Flint was very annoyed with this prompt rescue—he'd been given no time to retrieve his diamonds. The fire was put out smartly, and Flint, for the rest of his time, was lodged in another cell—and never once did he get a chance to go back to his original cell.

Eventually he was released, empty-handed, and he came back to London to discuss his problem with some of the boys at the Minerva Club. And let it be said, here and now—when any member of the Club was in trouble, the others rallied round with advice and help and with only a minimum thought of self-interest.

Well, there were several opinions offered. Solly Badrubal said, "Go back and get pinched again in Brankfold. Slug that same fellow—then maybe you'll be put back in the same cell they first gave you."

Flint shook his head. "When I left they hadn't even begun to repair it."

Milky Waye suggested that Flint try and get a job as a guard there. They could easily fake his credentials.

"They'd recognize him by his wooden leg," said Jim O'Leary.

Horace Head said, "You could bribe one of the warders to get the rocks for you."

No one took any notice of Horace.

So there was Flint in a curious predicament and the prospect of a bright future slowly tarnishing—until one day Lottie came swaying on stiletto heels into the Ladies' Annex of the Club, was settled with a large pink gin, and announced to Flint that she had the answer. Ever since leaving Brankfold, she said, she had subscribed to the *Brankfold Courier*.

"Why?" asked Flint.

"Because we had such a nice time there. I'm sentimental like that."

"Ah, yes," said Flint.

"And look at this," said Lottie. She placed a copy of that week's *Courier* in front of him. There on the front page was the story of how the Brankfold jail, so little used, had been declared obsolete by the Prison Commissioners and was to be put up for auction at the end of the month—the whole bloomin' business, Chief Constable's house, eight-cell block with kitchen and offices, and an exercise yard that could be converted into a nice garden.

"But I don't want to *buy* it," said Flint.

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"You don't have to, darling. But they must let people look over the property—people who are *thinking* of buying. You just go down and get an order to view, get into that cell, and pinch back your diamonds."

Although it was strictly forbidden to indulge in such an act in the Ladies' Annex, except on guest nights, Flint took Lottie in his arms, upset her pink gin, and gave her a resounding kiss.

The next day Flint was off to Brankfold with Solly Badrubal, Jim O'Leary, Horace Head, and Lottie. Flint had no intention of going into the prison himself—some of the staff were still there and might recognize him—and there was still a hullabaloo going on about the original theft of the diamonds. No, Flint was much too clever for that.

They all stayed at the Royal Hotel and Solly tried his hand first. He got an order to view from the auctioneers.

When he came back he shook his head. "No luck, Flint. A young man came with me from the auctioneers. Couldn't shake him off—and he wasn't very keen even about me going into the cell. The floor's still unsafe."

The next day Jim O'Leary tried. But it was the same story. The auctioneer's young man had stuck to him like a leech and just couldn't be shaken off.

The next day, without much hope, they tried Horace. Horace came back beaming. "You know, it would make a nice place, that prison. Good garden. Nice young man from the auctioneer's told me it'll go for about ten thousand. A snip."

"What about my diamonds?"

"Oh, them. Well, I didn't fancy that floor. Even if I did—the young chap wouldn't leave me alone."

"Damn the fellow," said Flint. Then he turned to Lottie, desperation stimulating an idea in him. Although Flint—out of chivalrous respect—never involved any of his perfect women in his professional schemes, this seemed a very special case. He said, "You must try, darling. You go over the place and when you get to that cell, you faint—calling out for water. He'll dash off and leave you alone for a minute or two—and that's all you need."

"What—faint on a floor that's unsafe?"

"Don't be silly. Faint in the doorway. Anyway the floor will hold you."

Lottie hesitated for a moment, then she said, "All right, darling. It seems the only way left—and it means so much to us both."

"It means twenty thousand knicker," said Solly. "For that I'd go into a coma for a month."

So Lottie went off the next day and did her stuff. She came back, upset, with a patch of burnt wood ash on her neat little rump, and said angrily, "It didn't work. I fainted, calling for water—and what

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do you think that fool of a young man did? He caught me up in his arms, pulled a brandy flask from his pocket, and damned near choked me. And when I said I wanted water, he *carried* me down into the kitchen. I couldn't shake him off. I've had enough of this diamond hunt, Flint. I'm going back to London and you can call me when you've got the diamonds."

And she left in a huff. Flint wasn't going to have his perfect woman unless he cracked his problem—and soon. Flint was a little upset but he saw her logic: you can't expect a perfect woman to hang around forever, waiting for a payday that never comes.

However, that evening in his bedroom the four of them got down to it over a bottle of whiskey, and with the help of a telephone call to Milky Waye the problem was solved. They would go to the auction and buy the prison. Flint had £5,000—the rest, if necessary, could be raised after the sale on a mortgage. Once the prison was his he could get the diamonds—the others taking a small cut for their help—and then Flint could resell the prison, maybe at a profit. It was Milky's idea. Milky said that he would come down and bid for Flint at the auction. Which he did.

The auction was held outside in the exercise yard of the prison and there were a lot of people there. As Flint said, "Who the hell wants to *buy* a prison? They must be mad."

Only Horace answered. "You could make a nice place of it—nice garden—"

"Shut up," said Jim O'Leary. "It gives me the creeps just being in this yard. Think of all the poor souls who've slogged around here, longing for a butt to smoke."

The bidding was brisk and went quickly up to £7,000. There it lagged a bit, then got its second wind, and, finally, Milky Waye had it knocked down to him at £11,000.

As the crowd dispersed, the auctioneer said to Milky Waye, "If your principal will just sign these papers . . . and give me his check for the deposit . . . Thank you. Here are the keys—we'll get the deeds and all that settled later. There may be a little delay because I'm short-handed at the moment—staff trouble, you know. Wonderful little property—full of possibilities . . ."

"Oh, full . . ." said Milky.

Then the five of them stood about, waiting for the crowd to go, the bunch of cell keys in Flint's hands. When the last person had left, Flint stumped off toward the top cells with the others following him. He unlocked the door and held the rest back.

"Floor won't hold us all," he said, and then added with a grin, "Don't want any misfortune at the last moment, do we?"

But that was exactly what he got.

He went gingerly over the floor and got up on the bed. The end of the string was still tied to the venti-

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lator grille. He pulled it up—all two feet of it—and there at the other end was the wash-leather bag.

Flint jerked it free and went back to the others, who crowded round to see the diamonds. But already thunderclouds had gathered on Flint's face. The only thing in the bag was a large sheet of mauve notepaper, carefully folded and smelling of scent.

"No diamonds—I've been robbed!" stormed Flint.

"Perhaps you've got the wrong cell?" suggested Horace.

"Shut up." said Jim O'Leary.

"Read the blasted letter," said Solly Badrubal, "though why should I be anxious for bad news?"

"It's a woman's writing," said Milky. "That's a bad sign."

"It's Lottie's," said Flint, and then more weakly, holding the letter out to Milky, "You read it—I can't . . ."

"You really should get some glasses," said Horace.

"Shut up," said Milky, and he began to read the note, which said:

Darling Flint,

I know this will distress you, but it is so much better to be honest and hurt a person than to be dishonest and store up unhappiness for us both. It is not just your wooden leg —after all, many a woman has truly loved a man with physical disabilities—

"This," said Milky, "was not composed by Lottie. It is not her style. She had help."

He went on:

—but it is rather your blemishes of character, particularly your quick temper, which have decided me. I think I knew this from the moment you came to the tea dance and were so brutal to sweet Duncan Brown—

"Who the hell," said Flint, "is Duncan Brown?"

"Search me," said Solly.

"I know," said Horace. "He's that tall, dark-haired chap who wears a Donegal tweed suit—the one from the auctioneer's office. We had a long talk together. Yes, Duncan Brown—that's his name."

Milky was saying, "Just listen to the rest of it—"

From that moment I knew you were not the man for me. Duncan and I love each other—for a long time I was not sure, but when I fainted in here, meaning to do all you said, he was so kind and chivalrous, so wonderfully tender and understanding, that those few moments in his arms—

"Enough!" roared Flint. "She's bilked me."

"They are," said Milky, finishing the reading of the note to himself, "honeymooning in the Bahamas. And I guess that's why the auctioneer is short-staffed."

Flint turned—a broken man—and stumped away, saying, "I need a whiskey. A very large one. And what the hell do I do now—with a prison on my hands?"

Well, of course, if Life is full of disappointments, it also has its com-

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pensations. Nothing is so bad as it looks. In fact, in this case, it was much better.

Flint tried to sell the prison but never got a decent offer for it. In the end he converted it into a private hotel for "special" guests recuperating from misfortune or just wanting to be anonymous for a while. Most of them were members of the Minerva Club who wanted to get quietly away into the country, and all of them appreciated the irony of living comfortably in a converted jail.

Flint—with occasional help from Horace—made over the exercise yard into a garden, and discovered that he had green fingers, that he had no further longing for "the perfect woman," and that at last he had found a home which, not only in appearance but in association, was full of the rich memories of the past.

EDITORS' NOTE: *Coming next—the tale of the Minerva Club in which the three Head brothers, each in his fashion, helped make their sister's wedding an "event to remember" . . .*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN BELL CLAYTON**

TITLE: ***A Warm Day in November***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Virginia

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Uncle Gene McCantland saw all life as a kind of flowing—through himself, through other men and women, through animals, and through trees . . . And now he was on trial for a serious crime.*

HIS TRIAL WAS HELD AT THE JANuary term of the Circuit Court before a jury of twelve of his fellow Virginians and with silver-haired Judge Estes presiding. Outside the Courthouse windows, snow lay white upon the square and the park with its statue of General Robert E. Lee astride Traveller and facing south in the dignity of defeat. Snow covered the nearby hills, and on beyond it lay deep in the valleys and hollows out in the Allegheny Mountains where we people came from.

The courtroom was filled with lean weathered men, hard and quiet and intent. Every seat was taken and back against the walls men were standing. Men from the rolling hills and the orchard country were there, and men from the patch farms and the valleys and the remote hollows. Some had driven their old cars thirty or forty miles into town or had gotten rides with neighbors. The very fiber of our country was there.

I watched the thin, gentle figure of Uncle Gene McCantland, my mother's brother, as he took the witness stand in his own defense. It is a deeply distressing thing to see one of your own kin on trial for a serious crime. The witness chair looked too big for him. The whole proceeding seemed too big for him.

I looked at Uncle Gene's face. He had clear blue eyes and a long nose, a wide straight mouth and abnormally large ears. They looked arti-

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ficial, as if they were made of papier-mâché and pasted to his head. Even with the long nose and large ears his face had a quality in it that made you think of a woman's face—a restraint and gentleness and silent outrage that is largely feminine.

One of Uncle Gene's lawyers, Mr. Frank Waller, had arisen at the defense table, leaning forward a little, his fingertips just touching the edge of the table.

"Now Mr. McCantland," he said, "I'm goin' to ask you about meetin' Perlater and his friends there in the road. Perlater was left-handed, wasn't he?"

"Yes sir," Uncle Gene said in his soft-spoken voice.

"You knew he was left-handed?"

"Yes sir."

"You saw him reach with his left hand toward his inside coat pocket?"

"Yes sir," said Uncle Gene.

I sat with the members of my family, watching and listening. My mind kept going back to that Sunday morning in the early part of November when Uncle Gene came riding sadly down the clay and gravel road on his black horse Eagle with his dog lying across the saddle in front of him.

He came around the turn under the big poplar below the Gaylor house. Eagle was walking slow. Uncle Gene had him reined in. He'd probably had trouble with the horse at first, but he was all right now. Uncle Gene had the reins in his left hand and had the dog's head and shoulders cradled in his right arm.

It was about mid-morning. My family was up at the Weeping Willow Presbyterian Church listening to Mr. Glendye's sermon. The Reeds and Hamiltons and Locklands and the other old families of the valley were also there, all of them listening to a sermon and singing hymns and praying, just as they had been doing every Sunday morning almost since the time there was a Mountain and Valley County.

I was down at the barn. I waited for Uncle Gene to turn in at the big gate and come on into the pasture, but he rode on past and kept to the road until he got opposite the barn. Then he pulled Eagle up and called down to me, "Go to the blacksmith shop and bring a pick and shovel up to the orchard."

"What do you want with a pick and shovel?" I called back.

Uncle Gene's quiet voice came down through the field to me. "I'm goin' to bury my dog," he said.

There was a little echo against the side of the barn. It was almost a whisper: *"Goin' to bury my dog."*

I went around to the blacksmith shop and got the pick and shovel. I went up through the field toward the road with the pick over my shoulder and the shovel balanced level in my hand. The field was dry and brown. Uncle Gene had ridden on ahead of me, slowly, still holding the dog in the crook of his right

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arm. I could hear Eagle's shoes on the gravel and the outcroppings of limestone rock in the road.

It was a soft gentle day, a day a little like my uncle's voice. It was what some people called Indian summer; others said Indian summer did not come until December. Anyway, it was a warm day for November. The valley was still full of color, for fall had come late.

The slopes of the mountains on each side of the valley were ugly and barren where the Company had been cutting the trees. They had come into the valley, they said, to take out only white oak for barrel staves, but they took everything as they went—chestnut oak, red oak, poplar, even cedar and pine. Fifteen sawmill camps were scattered around in the hollows and they were taking everything but the stumps and the huckleberries. If you have ever lived in mountain country and seen that you know what it is like. It makes you wonder what is so important in the world that a thing like that has to be done.

It had been crisp earlier that morning. It must have been crisp when Uncle Gene got up just after daylight and went out into the yard and called the dog after he had heard the two shots close together.

We had heard the other dogs running since a little after midnight. They must have raised the fox somewhere on the other side of Dunlap Mountain because the first time we heard them was when they crossed the top of Dunlap running south. We recognized the owp-owp-owp of Perlater's fast bitch and the deeper boom of his older hound mingled with the yap-yap of the other dogs. We knew it was Perlater himself and that crowd of Company men wearing riding breeches and shiny leather leggings, men with unfamiliar names that belonged back in Pittsburgh or Cleveland or wherever the hell they had come from.

Uncle Gene rode ahead of me over the top of the hill. He stopped Eagle at the orchard and slowly got off the horse with the dog in his arms. He laid the dog down on the bank and looped Eagle's reins over a fence post and picked up the dog and carried him to the edge of the orchard where three cedars grew in a row beside the fence. I climbed the fence at the road and went up into the orchard where Uncle Gene was standing beneath one of the cedars.

"That Jess Perlater killed my dog," he said quietly.

I said, "How do you know it was him?"

"It was his dogs we heard," he said. "He's the only man in this country who carries a revolver when he's fox huntin'. He's the only man in this country who'd do that kind of a thing."

That was the first time in my life I had ever heard of a man killing a dog unless the dog had gone mad or was running sheep or cattle or had gotten so mean he was a danger to

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children or to people passing along the road. I had never heard of a neighbor wantonly killing another neighbor's dog. I had never heard my father speak of it, or my grandfather. I had never heard of it in any of the old stories. White men had been living in that valley for two hundred years, and before that the Indians had been there, and in none of the handed-down stories, not even about the Shawnees or Cherokees, had such a thing ever been mentioned.

Uncle Gene was standing there with the dog lying at his feet. There was a wound around the dog's left eye that had been put there with a heavy-calibered gun. It was an ugly wound. Part of the ear had been torn away. There was still blood around the wound. I could not get over the strangeness, the *wrongness* of it.

He was a rust-colored young hound that had been sent to Uncle Gene by a big right-handed pitcher for the Washington Senators named Jack Sterling who used to come down for fox hunting. Uncle Gene named the dog Jack.

But it was not merely that Uncle Gene was proud because he was the only man in that country who had ever been given a dog by Jack Sterling, the big-league baseball pitcher. It was something else.

It was the relationship that Uncle Gene had with all living things. There was some subtle communication that came out of the heart of his gentleness—a thing that children and animals seemed to recognize and respond to. I believe he saw all life as a kind of flowing—through himself, through other men and women, through animals, through trees. It was a sense of continuity, I think, that is often lost in more articulate people. I think he had the greatest respect for life as such of any man I have ever known.

"I think I will bury him about here," Uncle Gene said.

Leaves had blown over under the cedar from the other trees. He took the shovel and scraped them away. He scraped the ground bare and pushed the shovel into the earth. He didn't need the pick. The earth was loam and clay and the rain had made it soft and the leaves had kept it that way.

I looked at Uncle Gene's hands. They were small and white. They had none of the moles and brown spots that cover the backs of the hands of most farm men. They looked white and small and delicate on the handle of the shovel.

Uncle Gene started digging a grave for the body of his dog.

He was wearing a canvas hunting coat. He stopped once and took off the coat and folded it carefully and laid it on the ground. I offered to take a turn with the shovel, but he shook his head. He wanted to dig the grave himself.

I went over and sat down on a big limestone rock near a clump of sumac.

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Uncle Gene finished digging the grave and put the shovel aside. He stood there a little while looking down the valley in the direction we had last heard the hounds running. We couldn't hear them any longer. They must have caught the fox somewhere below the Davenport place where the valley narrowed and the river flowed over a bed of black rocks below the road. Maybe they had run the fox into a den in the rocks on the side of Dunlap. That meant that the Company crowd and their hounds would be coming back up the valley after a while.

Uncle Gene picked up the dog and laid him in the grave. He stood looking down at Jack for the last time, his face restrained and gentle like a sorrowing woman's.

"I can't hardly stand to throw the dirt onto him," he said.

He said it low, so low I could hardly hear him, almost as if he were talking to himself. It was almost as low as the echo against the side of the barn: *"Goin' to bury my dog."*

"I think I'll just put my coat over top of him," he said.

He picked up the canvas coat and put it over the dog, covering his head and face and tucking it under his sides. Then he took the shovel and eased the dirt in around the dog and rounded out a little mound over him.

"I like to think about Jack bein' able to hear the rest of them when they run on clear cold nights with the stars out," Uncle Gene said.

We stood for a minute looking at the fresh dirt. Then I took the pick and shovel and we walked on down to the fence without looking back.

Uncle Gene untied Eagle and we started walking back up the road under the poplars and oaks, Eagle following along behind.

"I guess I'm goin' to hafta face that man before the day is over," he said quietly.

We walked up the hill. There was a great white-oak tree on top of the hill and when we came to it we stopped. We stood in the road and Uncle Gene began telling me what had happened.

"I found him behind a log beside that path that goes up the side of Betty's Hill," he said. "I think he went up there and got in the chase just about daylight, just about the time they crossed over from the other side of Dunlap the second time. I could hear him after that. I think the fox led the dogs north for a while and the men were sittin' there on top of Betty's. Then the fox must have doubled back and run right by the men as they sat there on their horses. I expect that Jack, bein' fresh, was in the lead and Perlater knew it by his bayin'. I expect Perlater was sittin' there with his pistol in his hand and his mind made up to take a shot at him. He must have shot him as he slowed to jump the log."

As Uncle Gene was talking, the

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strangest feeling came over me. We were standing there in the road under the big oak tree. Scarlet leaves were scattered over the road. Uncle Gene was talking in a low voice. His blue eyes did not leave mine all the time he was speaking. They were unwavering, and there was something inexorable in them. I got the strange feeling that I was taking part—that the two of us were taking part—in something that had already happened. And I knew that Uncle Gene was feeling the same thing.

We started walking on down the hill, Uncle Gene still leading Eagle.

"I don't expect Perlater was even mad," he said.

I knew what he meant. The two Perlater brothers had come from West Virginia. Maybe they had been with the Company in other parts of the country. They were both tremendous, swaggering men. Up at Deer Meadow the story was told about what the two Perlater brothers said to each other the first day they came into the valley and stopped on the brow of Calhoun Hill and looked down at the little village that was to become a boom town.

"I'll take the hotel, the poolroom, and the movie house," Harold Perlater was reported to have said.

"I'll take the poker and dice game and the bootlegging," Jess said.

"We'll divide up the women," Harold Perlater told his brother in that bluff, swaggering way that had the strong undercurrent of truth to it.

They were that kind of men.

My Uncle Gene and I walked on down the gravel road toward the rusty iron gate that led into the meadow.

The Company itself had done something to the valley in which our people had lived for generations. It is hard to say just what it was. It was not that they took land without paying a just price or that they exploited the men who worked for them. They paid their way as they went and they paid a fair price for the land. Men with trucks and teams of horses made more money with the Company than they had ever made before in their lives. In fact, the Company was open-handed about money. They would see a piece of mountain land they wanted and they would go to the owner and say, "How much is it worth?" And they would pay the asking price.

Perhaps that was it. The money. Or that and other things not so easy to put your finger on. There was, for example, a very pretty valley girl named Ida Gibson whom Harold Perlater got into trouble and whose father took money from the Perlaters. And there were the scarred mountainsides and the roads broken and gutted by the heavy lumber trucks. There was the exodus from the valley of wild turkey and quail and small game that had always used the mountains for cover. There was a solemn old Negro named

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George Wayland who used to preach every Sunday in an old warehouse until Jess Perlater bought the building and converted it into a bowling alley.

It is a hard thing to express. Most of the Company men were likable enough when you met them. They were open-handed men with a breezy, casual way of doing things. It is very hard to object to a casual way of doing things. The arrogance was not so much within the individual men as within the collective enterprise itself.

How much for this right-of-way? . . . We're going through your property but we'll pay you for it . . . How much for a building in which an old Negro preached to his few people? . . . How much for ruining the mountains and the roads? . . . How much for a horse? A daughter? . . . Name the price and we'll pay you.

My Uncle Gene and I walked down the road and went through the gate and into the meadow.

"It used to be," he said, "that a man could sit on his front porch in the evenin's and listen to the whippoorwills."

As we were going through the field, the Company crowd came into sight farther down the valley. They were riding up along the quiet river, coming up our way, eight men on horses with their tired hounds trotting along beside them. We could hardly see the hounds from that distance.

"I might get into a little trouble over this thing," Uncle Gene said to me in his quiet way, "but I'm goin' to face that man. I want to hear what he's got to say."

We emerged from the field and Uncle Gene went into the house. I led Eagle past the cedars to the creek and let him drink, and then I took him back up and tied him at the front gate. I went through the gate into the yard and walked along the slate walk under the maples to the house. I sat down on the porch. I watched the men coming up the valley.

In a little while I heard Uncle Gene coming through the hall outside the house. He had his .30-30 Winchester rifle in his hand. He sat down on the front steps and took the cartridges out of the magazine and looked at them. He looked at each cartridge carefully before slipping it back into the magazine. He pumped one into the cartridge chamber.

He had changed clothes. He had on his black felt Sunday hat and his blue serge suit and a white shirt and a dark red necktie that wasn't tied well. Uncle Gene never could tie a tie well. The knot was a sort of complicated lump under the right side of his collar. I don't know how many times I have seen my mother go up to him and straighten his tie. I wanted to do that now.

I made a clumsy effort to talk to him.

"If you're bound to go up there

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and meet them," I said, "why don't you leave your rifle here?"

I was too young to talk to him; I didn't know enough.

Uncle Gene looked at me with his unwavering blue eyes. He did not answer me.

I thought about Uncle Gene standing alone in his room on that quiet Sunday morning, on that warm November day, looking into the mirror on his dresser and putting that tie on. I thought about him adjusting it and shifting it about deliberately with his sensitive hands, his calm blue eyes watching his hands in the mirror, and not able to do it right; and finally giving it up and taking the rifle down from the closet.

As I watched him there on the front steps, examining the cartridges, I had the sudden desperate wish that this was happening instead to my father's brother, Uncle Jerome English. Uncle Jerome would have let out a holler they could have heard up at the church, three miles away. He would have given Jess Perlater one of the worst cursings one human being ever gave another. He probably would have bought a jug of moonshine whiskey and stayed tanked-up for two or three days and he would have gotten it out of his system. It would have been very simple to explain to my family what had happened while they were at church if Uncle Jerome had been involved. And I had again the sick feeling of watching Uncle Gene in the re-enactment of something that had happened long ago.

He arose slowly. "You stay here," he said a little sternly. "I don't want you mixed up in this."

He started out through the yard under the maples. Then he turned and came back.

"I might have to go away for a while," he said. "I'm not sure, but I might. If I do, I want you to look after Eagle till I get back."

He reminded me about stabling Eagle if there was a cold rain and told me how much oats and corn to feed him. He shook hands with me, quickly. I stood there and watched him walk out through the yard, not fast, and untie Eagle and mount and ride up through the field to the road a half mile from the house.

The way they told it later—the way a man named Whiting testified to it—they were coming up the road when they saw the slight gentle-faced man with the long nose and large ears sitting astride the black horse in the middle of the road ahead of them. To say that he was blocking the road seemed the wrong way to put it; he did not seem big or imposing enough to block anything, much less to keep that Company crowd from going anywhere or doing anything they wanted to do.

"I didn't know the man," Whiting said in court. "I didn't know who he was or what he wanted or what he was trying to do. I got the

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notion he was trying to get us to do something, maybe to go back down the road."

Perlater knew him—knew him less by name than as the owner of the rust-colored hound he had seen and killed earlier in the day. So Perlater rode ahead of the others, spurred his two-year-old roan, and trotted on up the road ahead of his friends.

Perlater must have thought the whole thing would take only a minute. He was perfectly prepared to be generous.

"About that dog," Perlater said. "How much would you say he was worth?"

And already he was changing the reins in his hands and automatically reaching with his left hand toward his inside coat pocket.

Uncle Gene did not even wait for Perlater to complete the gesture. Nor did he say a word. He threw the rifle to his shoulder and fired the single shot that took away the side of Perlater's head in almost exactly the same way that Perlater's bullet had torn away the dog's head.

Uncle Gene said only one thing during the whole confusion, after Perlater's horse had turned and galloped back among the others, with some of the other horses now pitching and lunging and the reverberation of the shot already evaporating. I heard that part of it as I was running toward the road.

"You heard him!" Uncle Gene called out. His voice was strangely clear above the clamor. "You all heard him offer me money! You saw him reachin' . . ."

And now Uncle Gene was on the witness stand, accused of murder in the first degree.

And the people from the farms and valleys and Allegheny hollows were there listening. Twelve men, people like ourselves, were listening and watching before filing into a room and searching their hearts and taking a vote on what to do about my Uncle Gene. The fiber of our country was there. Its justice was there and perhaps its compassion.

Outside, the snow lay on the ground, on the parks in the town and on the hills beyond the town and on the granite face of old mountains—the Alleghenies, standing there stately and somber, devoid of either mercy or misgiving.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 254th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Mrs. Fried's "One Morning in the Park" is an unusual and tenaciously interesting "first story" with a final—but no, we'll not say another word about it . . .

The author was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1924. She attended the University of Rhode Island (known "in those days" as Rhode Island State College). She has been a chemist and a teacher, and has held the usual number of odd jobs, most of which she now prefers to forget. More recently, she was an associate editor, primarily for college texts in music and psychiatry, with W. W. Norton. Her avocation: dieting—at least, that's what she says she spends all her spare time doing (she has written three cookbooks!). Her hobbies: feeding people (naturally!), talking to them, playing the piano, and, of course, reading . . . Writing is definitely not a hobby—it is now her vocation.

ONE MORNING IN THE PARK

by BARBARA FRIED

About ten in the morning the women began to come to the park, pushing baby carriages or shepherding toddlers and tricycle riders over the signs stenciled on the sidewalk that said *NO bicycles dogs roller skating ballplaying.* They sat on the riverside benches in the spring sun, talking together, reading, knitting, guarding the children who quarreled in the sandpits or played on the polygon-paved walk.

About eleven a few men began to appear, most of them carrying *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal.* They sat on their chosen benches, as aloof as male walruses on a breeding beach, ignoring the mothers, unconcerned with the children who played near them or skimmed past on bicycles. The men never spoke to anyone, and below, the traffic on the drive rumbled with the distant noise of trolls.

But this spring three of the mothers got involved with two of the men who came regularly to the park. It wasn't the mothers' fault: Julie's dachshund, Ranger, was really to blame. One morning he slipped his leash and got away be-

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fore Julie realized the dog was free.

She pursued him lazily up the walk, but before she caught up with him he'd run over to an older man sitting a few benches away, and had begun to sniff at his ankles. The man peered over the edge of his newspaper to see what had disturbed him; then swiftly, without a word, he drew his foot back and kicked Ranger hard in the throat.

The dog, taken by surprise, gave a strangled yelp and went sprawling; he'd scrambled back up and was about to launch himself in a counterattack when Julie finally reached him. She scooped up his squirming body and held it tight against her bosom. Her voice shaking, she said, "That wasn't the least bit necessary. Somebody ought to kick you in the neck and see how you'd like it."

"Keep your damn dog on a leash the way you're supposed to," the man snapped. "He shouldn't even be in this park to begin with. You dog owners are all alike—think the city belongs to you."

"He wasn't doing you any harm."

"He'd better not, either. If he ever makes another move to bite me, I'll call a cop and have him shot." He held his newspaper up again and started to read, dismissing her.

In the face of such massive hostility, Julie felt helpless. Too well-bred to make the scene she wanted to, she returned to the bench, still holding the whimpering dog, and pale with rage.

Betty and Elaine, the other two mothers, shared her indignation; and while they were discussing the enormity of the offense, Karen, Julie's six-year-old, came up and saw their agitation.

"What's the matter with Ranger, mommy?"

"That man kicked him."

"Kicked Ranger? *Why?"*

Julie hesitated. "I guess he thought Ranger was going to bite him."

"Was he really?"

"No, of course not."

Karen clenched her small hard hands. "The rotten old meanie!"

"Karen, how many times have I told you not to call people rotten?"

"I know, mommy—let's call him Mr. Misery—he looks just like him anyways."

The three women laughed and Julie hugged her daughter. "There's a character—a mean old man—in one of her books named that," she explained to the others. Then, to Karen, "All right—let's."

So Mr. Misery was the first man the three mothers became involved with. Later the same morning, as Julie was bending over the carriage, a hesitant voice said in her ear, "Excuse me. I saw what that man over there did to your dog before. Is he all right? The dog, I mean."

Startled, Julie looked up, but all she could see of the young man who was standing in front of the carriage, peering down at the dog, was the top of his head, covered with

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thinning brown hair. When he straightened up, she realized she knew his long-jawed pale face from somewhere, but she couldn't place it.

"Oh—I guess he's okay, thanks."

"That's good." Nodding shyly to the other two women, the young man walked away with a stiff-legged farmer's stride.

"Where do I know him from?" Julie wondered.

"Why, from right here," Betty answered. "I've noticed him a couple of times before—he usually sits on that bench over there. He must be going to college—he's always reading."

After that both men became daily topics of conversation for the three women. Mr. Misery, of course, paid no attention to anyone else. And the young man, too, never seemed to be aware of their scrutiny. As Betty had said, he was always reading, and no matter what the size or kind of book—even a paperback—he always had it wrapped in an opaque plastic jacket.

The three women would never have known his name except that one day Karen chased a ball which came to rest next to the young man's foot. He silently picked it up and held it out to her. Julie was facing in the opposite direction at the time, but Betty called her attention to what was happening by raising an eyebrow and nodding her head.

Julie swung around. The young man was handing Karen the ball.

"Thank you," Karen said politely. She tucked the ball under her arm and moved closer, her back straight in her yellow playsuit, her light pigtailed hair shining in the sun.

"You're welcome," the young man said.

"What's your name?"

"Jack."

"Mine's—"

"Karen! Come over here, I want you."

The young man glanced at Julie with perfect understanding. "Quite right," he said, and immediately looked back at his book. Karen stood in front of him for a second or two more, then Julie called again. "*Karen!* You come over here this minute."

The little girl went reluctantly. "What?" she asked.

Julie said, rather crossly, since the young man had behaved so correctly, "Haven't I told you *not* to talk to strangers?"

"He isn't a stranger," Karen said. "He's always sitting there."

"Don't argue with me. Go play ball—they're waiting for you."

Karen sighed and ran back to her playmates.

The three women sat silent for a moment, then resumed their conversation. However, the ice was broken, and the next morning Karen started to talk to Jack again. This time Julie let her stay for a while. But she watched him like a hawk every minute Karen was near him, and she couldn't see anything

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wrong with the way he acted. He didn't invite Karen to sit down; he made no special effort to be pleasant to her; and he certainly never made the slightest move to touch her.

Actually, Julie had mixed feelings: she was rather pleased to see Karen being polite to somebody in the park. She'd been having a lot of trouble controlling Karen's manners. It had started right after Mr. Misery kicked Ranger. Three or four times Karen would run up behind him and scream in his ear so that he'd jump; then she'd run away before the man could recover.

Julie had pretended not to notice what Karen was doing, and once the child learned she could get away with such behavior, she carried it even further. Whenever she went by Mr. Misery's bench, she banged a stick or a toy on the back of it, or she'd make believe she was shooting him, yelling, "Bang, you're dead," and then laugh in the man's face. Julie made only a half-hearted effort to stop her as long as Karen's hostility was confined to Mr. Misery, but lately Karen had begun to act the same way with other people.

Though Julie was willing to let Karen talk to Jack, she never let the child stay with him more than a few minutes without coming over to get her and apologizing to him. Then one morning, after she'd fetched Karen away often enough and the two other women had not yet appeared, they sat together and chatted for a half hour.

Julie found their conversation somewhat puzzling. He wasn't unfriendly; yet she felt throughout their talk that he wasn't genuinely interested in anything they were discussing. As she expressed it to the other two women, she never thought she was getting through to him.

"It's not that he's unsympathetic," Julie said solemnly, "or mean, or anything—he's always very sweet to Karen—but there just doesn't seem to be anything *there*."

"Speaking of being mean," Betty said, "did you see that awful story in the paper this morning?"

"Which awful story?"

"The one about that baby boy."

"Oh, the one who was killed by his sister? Wasn't that terrible!"

"I didn't see it," Julie said. "What happened?"

Betty began to recount it with morbid relish. "This mother left her baby on a bed that was pushed up against a window—"

"An open window," Elaine supplied.

"And she went out of the room for a few minutes, and when she came back—no baby!"

"What happened?"

"The baby's sister'd rolled him across the bed and pushed him out—just like that—" and Betty made a flipping motion with her hands.

"How old was the sister?"

"About three and a half, I think—isn't that right, Elaine?"

Elaine nodded.

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The three of them contemplated the situation for a moment, then Julie said firmly, "*I* blame the mother. She should've known better than to leave a baby with a child that age. You never know *what* they'll do."

"But you can't be with them every single blessed minute, can you?" Betty argued. "Is that what I've got to look forward to?"

"You'll see," Julie said, smiling.

"Speaking of accidents and babies," Elaine said, "I heard a story a couple of weeks ago that's a lot worse than the one in the paper."

"Wait a sec," Julie said. Karen was standing in front of Jack at the next bench, showing him a stick she'd picked up. "Karen, you run away and leave Jack alone."

"Oh, okay," Karen said, disgusted, and walked to one of the sandpits, dragging the stick.

"Go ahead," Julie said, settling back.

"I heard this story from my pediatrician," Elaine began. "He told me that one day he got a frantic call from another patient, a woman with two kids, to come over right away—there'd been a terrible accident. She wouldn't say any more on the phone, just begged him to hurry. He ran over at once, and this mother had a girl—I think about six or seven—and she'd had another girl about five months before. The older child liked to play mommy with the baby, and she'd brought a friend of hers in to see it, a kid from the next apartment. Well, the older sister picked the baby up out of the crib to show it off to her friend—and she dropped it."

"Was it hurt?"

"Well, that mother—I don't know who she is, but she's a better woman than I am—the older child yelled and the mother came running. She picked the baby up, and the minute she did she knew something serious was the matter."

"What?"

"The baby was dead."

"Oh, no!"

"Did she know it was dead right away?"

"You know how it is—you can tell when you pick them up if there's anything really wrong with them."

The other two nodded agreement.

"Well, anyway, you know what she did? She put the dead baby back in the crib and didn't say anything to the older kids. She sent them out to the other apartment, and *then* she called the doctor."

"Without saying *any*thing to them? Without even telling them they'd hurt the baby?"

"Nope. Not a word."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"When the doctor got there, there wasn't anything he could do. The baby's neck was broken."

"How absolutely awful! What'd they do then?"

"The doctor and the mother de-

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cided between them to tell the older child that the baby was sick. They bundled the baby into the doctor's car and drove to the hospital—"

"Can you imagine how she must've *felt?*"

"But why to the hospital if the baby was dead?"

"Wait. When they got there, they made all the arrangements for the funeral and everything, and she called her husband and told him what had happened and what she'd done. And the next day they told the older child that the baby had died in the hospital from being sick, not from the fall. And that was that."

"I can't believe she didn't say a *word—*"

"The doctor said no. That once she saw the baby was dead, that there was nothing she could do for it, that all her thoughts went to her older child—to protect her from what she'd done."

"I'm sure I'd have got so upset I'd probably have fainted."

"You never can tell how you're going to react to something like that. Well, nothing like that *exactly,* I hope, but in any emergency with the kids you forget your usual self temporarily. Like that time Peter fell out of the tree and cut his leg, I was so worried about him I forgot how squeamish I am at the sight of blood."

"Yes, but something like having your baby killed," Julie protested. "Though I don't know what in the world possessed her to allow a six-year-old to pick up a baby, I must say. I wouldn't let Karen even *touch* Howard."

At that moment Karen ran past them. "Bang! You're dead!" she yelled, and pointed her stick at Jack. He looked at her and she stopped hopefully.

"What're you reading?" Karen asked.

"Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Karen, you leave Jack alone," Julie called out. "He wants to read."

"That's all right," Jack said. Then, surprisingly, he rose and said to Elaine, "I couldn't help overhearing your story. May I ask you a question about it?"

Karen saw she wasn't going to have his attention, sighed, and sauntered over to lean against her mother's arm.

"Why, of course," Elaine said.

"Do you honestly think that mother did the right thing for her older child? Don't you think she'd know she'd really killed the baby, no matter what lie her mother told her?"

"Oh, no," Betty said, shocked. "How could a child know something like that?"

"Why wouldn't she? It's what really happened."

"Yes, but—even if the mother did tell the truth, what good would that do the child? It'd just make her suffer."

"What about later, though? Won't the mother remember it all

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the rest of her life? No matter how hard she tries to pretend it didn't happen, will she ever be able to convince herself it didn't? Sooner or later won't she blame the older child for the baby's death? Wouldn't it be better to bring the whole thing out in the open right away, reproach the child for having done something wrong, let her have a chance to feel sorry, and get it over with once and for all?"

"Yes, you might be right," Elaine murmured.

"This way," Jack went on, "the older child'll have to feel guilty a long time afterwards. Sooner or later she'll hear the story from somebody—she's *got* to—from somebody else in the family, some relative who doesn't like her or some cousin who's heard about it from his mother. Wouldn't it be better not to make such a terrible secret of it?"

"Of course," Elaine said thoughtfully, "the mother was trying to shield her oldest—you always feel specially protective about the first one. Besides, I got this whole story second-hand—we'd really have to know much more about it, we'd have to talk to the mother—"

"And the child," Jack added.

"The child? How could you talk to a child about something like *that?*" Betty protested. "She wouldn't be able to tell you how she felt."

"Why not?" Jack asked.

"Because that's not the way children think," Betty explained condescendingly.

"There was a tragedy something like that in my home town," Jack said. The women shifted in their seats, and Karen took a step forward. Reminded that she was there, Julie said, "Karen, go play in the sandpit."

"But, mommy, I don't want—"

"Go ahead, scoot," Julie ordered. "You can listen to what we say some other time, not now."

By the way the adults looked at her Karen understood she wasn't going to be able to stay no matter what she did, and drifted off.

"This family," Jack went on as soon as Karen was out of earshot, "had two children, too—a girl who was older and a boy the mother liked much better than she did the girl. One day the boy and a friend of his were in the yard playing with a shotgun—"

"With a shotgun?"

"Yes."

"Fine toy."

"And the gun was loaded—"

"Naturally. It always is, somehow."

"And it went off accidentally and killed the girl, who was sitting on the porch."

"How old was the boy?"

"Almost twelve."

"Well, there wasn't much the mother could do to protect him—after all, he was old enough to understand he'd killed his sister."

"Oh, yes. But that wasn't so bad,

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because he knew it really and truly had been an accident—one of those things that *can* happen to people. If it hadn't been for the mother, he would've been able to get over ***that*** all right."

"That's more than his sister was able to do," Julie commented.

"What did the mother do?" Elaine asked.

"She kept blaming him for the terrible thing he'd done, kept reminding him he'd killed his sister. He kept saying he hadn't meant to, which was the truth, but the boy could tell from the way she acted, the things she said, that *she* believed he'd done it on purpose. In a hundred ways she let him know she thought he was a menace to the world—after all, a boy who'd kill his sister would do anything, and who could tell what he'd do next?"

"But I thought you said she was fonder of the boy than the girl?"

"Of course, Julie," Elaine said. "Don't you see? She felt guilty about it after the girl had been killed. And what easier way to make herself feel better than to blame him, particularly when she *did* like him better? She must've felt it was some kind of judgment on ***her.***"

"The boy learned all that a lot later," Jack said. "And maybe he could even have lived with ***that***—but there was something else. Most of the other people in the town behaved just like that mother of yours who tried to pretend her child hadn't done anything wrong at all—they politely ignored the whole situation, and that's what made him really miserable. The boy began to feel he'd done something so horrible that nobody could bring themselves to talk about it, and he began to think that maybe his mother ***was*** right, that he ***had*** meant to shoot his sister, and that everybody knew it. Nobody ever said anything to him, you understand, but every time anybody looked at him, he knew they were thinking, 'That's him, that's the boy who killed his sister, shot her dead.'"

"What finally happened to him?" Elaine asked.

"He got to feel more and more guilty—and about a year after the accident he tried to kill himself, hang himself in the garage."

"How awful!" Betty shuddered.

"The thing is, they cut him down in time—but coming on top of the shooting accident, it was too much for his family. They felt so ashamed they had to move to another town, which just gave him something else to worry about—that the people of the new town would hear about his story and also think he was a monster."

"But those parents—*they* were the monsters," Elaine cried.

"Well, really, though," Julie commented, "what *could* they do? It wasn't *their* fault the boy had killed his sister. Playing with a shotgun! He should've known better. That's what started it all."

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"Don't you think they should've tried to help him bear his trouble, not add to it?" Jack asked.

"They didn't think they were adding to it," Julie answered. "The one *I* feel sorry for is that boy's mother. After all, she had to live with him knowing he'd murdered her little girl—don't forget that. How could she go on living that way? I know I'd think about it every time I saw him—how could you help it?"

"But it wasn't murder, it was an *accident!*" Jack exclaimed.

"Even if it was," Julie argued, "he's still responsible."

"Yes, but the point *is,*" Elaine said, "that the mother was punishing him because *she* felt guilty about the daughter's death. She had no right to do that, no matter *how* she felt, no matter what she may have thought whenever she looked at him."

"Oh, punish, smunish." Julie waved her hand airily.

"Julie, how can you think something like that's *funny?*"

Julie got up and stretched. "Really, Elaine, how can you expect me to feel involved with something that happened to somebody I don't even know? I simply cannot blame that mother, I'm sorry." She looked at her watch. "Lunch time. I'd better get started. Karen!"

"You'd just wash your hands of the whole thing, wouldn't you?" Jack's voice trembled slightly.

"What could I do even if I wanted to for any of those people?" Julie asked somewhat acidly. "I take it the boy's grown up by this time?"

Jack nodded.

"There, you see!" Julie said. "It's much too late to do anything, even if I wanted to help. Karen!"

Karen came running, and as she did she hit the back of Mr. Misery's bench with her stick.

"Bang! You're dead!" she shouted at him.

He glared after her, then pointedly shifted his glare to Julie, who promptly returned it with interest. "Come on, dear," she said sweetly to Karen, "time to go home. 'Bye all."

She released the brake on the carriage, and they moved off.

That was a Friday. On Monday it rained, and Tuesday was still too cloudy to spend time outdoors. On Wednesday morning the three women met on the sidewalk and walked together to the park. Soon after they got there, Jack arrived and sat down a few benches away; they waved to him, and he waved back, but made no attempt to talk to them. As usual, Mr. Misery showed up about 11:15, and sat on his regular bench.

About 11:30 Karen stopped in front of Jack who put away his book and began to talk to her. She was delighted, and sat down on his bench; he moved so that his back was to the three mothers, blocking their view.

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Jack and Karen talked for about five minutes, and just as Julie was about to go and get her, Karen stood up.

"What's that she's carrying?" Julie said as she watched Karen run away from the bench. "He gave her something."

Karen ran over to Mr. Misery and stood in front of him. "Hey!" she yelled.

"Karen! What're you doing?" Julie stood up.

Mr. Misery lowered his paper. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything,

"Bang! You're dead!" Karen shouted gleefully, and held out her arm.

The noise the small gun made as it went off was almost lost in the sound of Julie's scream.

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The triumphant return of 16-year old Bernie Halper, of Greenwich Village, New York City, involved once more in "a horrendous experience." But trust young Bernie and his high-powered, jet-propelled imagination . . . A case, to quote Bernie at his enthusiastic and exhilarating best, of "pure, sheer madness"—which, however exaggerated, is nevertheless pure, sheer gladness.

THE ONE AND ONLY BERNIE

by CHARLES GREEN

I HAVE SURVIVED A HORRENDOUS EXperience. With luck I may escape gangland vengeance. Of greater concern is what it has done to me *psychologically*. Personality change to that of an embittered misanthrope, a skulking loner? Me, Bernie Halper? But let the facts judge if I have grounds for such grim apprehension.

It all began innocently enough. I had taken a constitutional that deposited me on a bench in Washington Square. And there I lolled, only vaguely aware of the familiar hustle-bustle around me, toying in my mind with the idea of perhaps spending the night in a hotel.

Yep, some third-rate Broadway hotel, which should be heavier on local color and lighter on the exchequer. I lug in Pop's yellow suitcase that's covered with foreign labels. Sign the register as Nick Rocco, Las Vegas, Nevada. Case my room. Then go down to the lobby, find some unobtrusive vantage point, and proceed to observe the parade of bookies and con men and God knows what other demimondaine characters who'd frequent such a joint. Finally, curiosity satiated, up to my room, into bed, windows open, and the fading roar of the Gay White Way lulling me to sleep. A memorable experience.

However, the project had certain cons as well as pros, and I was weighing same when something poked my left arm. I swung around, and there was Joanie settling down next to me. Joanie Webster, a cute chick and my beloved on pretty much a permanent basis.

We exchanged amenities. Joanie said she could only stay a minute because she had a date to go shopping with her mother. Then she asked, "What was the Great Brain brooding about?"

I made a languid gesture and murmured, "Oh, I was merely probing a delicate point in ethics. The folks have taken off for an overnight visit with friends up-State. Now I promised Mom I'd be in bed

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at some sensible hour. *But* nothing was said about it being my *own* bed. So I thought I might check into a hotel."

Joanie stared, sat up. "Bernie Halper," she said in an outraged voice, "you *know* which bed your mother meant. Why, what a stupid *and* sneaky thing to do!"

A violent reaction really out of character with Joanie, a blithely simple chick. But I realized I'd goaded the slavish conformist within her.

"Simmer down," I said. "It was just idle conjecture. Besides, there might be a thinly camouflaged check-up call at around eleven o'clock, and mounting frenzy if I'm not in the apartment to answer the phone."

"Well, I'm glad you at least had the sense to think of *that,*" Joanie said coldly. "But why on earth would you even *consider* something so idiotic as spending money for a hotel room when you've a perfectly good bed of your own? Mother and I have stayed in many hotels. Believe me, there's nothing romantic or glamorous about it."

A crisis out of the blue! Derision in Joanie's eyes. The Woman of the World jeering at a Yokel. My stock with her plummeting. A certain status quo, built up after months of spade work, tottering in peril. It called for a swift counteroffensive.

I smiled thinly and said, "Sure, I'm seeking romance and adventure in the fleabag I've in mind. The filthy lobby reeking with disinfectants. The bed probably crawling with vermin. Oh, yes, *very* romantic and *very* glamorous!"

It routed the blasé sophisticate, leaving plain old Joanie gaping at me. I glanced at my wrist watch, rose from the bench, said briskly, "Now I must make the safari uptown. Half a loaf is better than none, and I won't be betraying the pact with my parents if I at least case the joint during the day. Be seeing you, honey-chile."

"Wait!" cried Joanie, now also on her feet. "Bernie, what *is* this all about?"

I pretended a scowl of indecision, then said, "Briefly, it's an unpleasant, yet necessary, bit of literary research. For the writing project I'm embarked on. That's all I will say about it for the present, and please keep it strictly *entre nous.*"

Wide-eyed Joanie said, "Yes, of course. You know something, Bernie? I'll bet you *could* write a book. And I'll bet it'd be a real weirdie, too." Before I could comment on what appeared to be a left-handed compliment, she added with discernible humility, "Mother only wants me to help her pick out new curtains for my room. You think you could be back here in an hour?"

"Barring unpredictable involvements uptown," I told her, "yes, I probably can."

"Well, please be careful," she urged.

And we parted on that tenderly solicitous note, taking off in oppo-

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site directions along the path.

Well! Marines have landed, situation well in hand. I'm off the hook. Joanie *on* the hook. Crisis resolved with deftness and finesse. Hence I enjoyed a pardonable bit of pleased smugness as I ambled on, concerned now only with how and where to while away an hour before rejoining my beloved.

Emerging from the Square onto West Fourth Street, I spotted a stationery store. Entering same, I purchased a pocket-sized notebook and cheap ballpoint pen. Evidence to exhibit to Joanie later in support of the literary-research myth. Plus, of course, a few pages filled with dramatic tidbits, dreamed up over a cup of coffee in a cafeteria, of my material-seeking adventures uptown.

And it was then, as I emerged from the store, that I did a sudden jarring double-take. Why *pretend* at literary research? At the age of sixteen I was adrift in jaded boredom. A long summer vacation facing me. Well, why *not* utilize it to launch a career as a writer?

I mean, it sort of roared into me, the message coming through loud and clear. Yes, sir, Bernie, old boy, this is *it*. You're a literary bloke. From now on *in*. Your take-off on a life that now has purpose and direction.

Solemnity, indeed, as I walked on, trying to decide what the heck I was going to write about. Not, surely, expanded figments of imagination I'd planned for Joanie. No, I vowed, I'll be a writer of integrity. Depict true-life stories as told to me by people who actually lived them. The unvarnished truth. My pitch when making contact? Well, I'm taking a summer course in journalism and have a roving assignment to bring back an interview of dramatic interest. Logical, credible. Now all I had to do was to find someone with an interesting story to relate.

Modus operandi thus crystalized in my mind, I crossed Sheridan Square and strode north along Seventh Avenue. All hepped up on this new glam career. Above Fourteenth Street, the fur district. Potential in guys rushing around entrusted with armloads of pelts that might be worth a fortune. More potential in slavies in the garment district, living dangerously as they pushed racks of dresses in and out of traffic. But it was when I neared Fortieth Street that I saw my first likely prospect.

It was a Sandwich Sign Man, standing still at the moment, his head thrust through the yoke from which hung two huge signs that practically obliterated the rest of him. The sign within my line of vision proclaimed that terrific values in men's clothing were available to the public in the establishment of a Mr. Saul Harris.

The man had a huge shock of gray hair. It suggested a musical Maestro. Perhaps ill-health, necessitating out-of-doors life, wrecks a distinguished career. His money

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runs out. His friends abandon him. Yet still the vital need of fresh air, sunshine, exercise. And thus he becomes a human beast of burden to help line the pockets of Mr. Saul Harris.

Deciding right there and then that I'd turn over to him any remuneration I might receive for writing up his pathetic story, I approached and said, "I beg your pardon."

He turned his head, and I had my first look of his face. Well, he sure as heck hadn't been leading an out-of-doors life. An unhealthy pallor on the ravaged face of a derelict, half-crazed bloodshot eyes glaring at me.

Though he gave me the creeps, I still had to say something. So I asked, "Would you mind satisfying my curiosity by telling me what those two signs weigh?"

"No speaka de English," he answered in a hoarse whisper. "Goomby!"

And goomby it was as I shied away from the creature, unnerved, discouraged by the dismal failure of my maiden effort. It lasted perhaps ten seconds and as many steps, and then I halted in my tracks, suddenly soaring from the depressive to the manic state. For there, a dozen feet away, was the Heaven-sent answer to what I was seeking: a mounted cop who had just reined in near the curb.

Though an avid reader of crime fiction, I have never, but *never*, seen anything in print in which the hero was a mounted cop. A literary oversight that shrieked for correction.

The mounted cop, unsung hero of New York's Finest! Works up saddle sores while fellow officers ride on foam rubber. Never any opportunity for *him* to sneak in somewhere for a fast smoke or a short beer. In fair weather or foul, he's astride his faithful mount. Yes, there they were: the kindly faced, elderly cop and the sleekly beautiful black stallion. Coordination of man and beast in law enforcement.

This is terrific, I thought. The Saga of the Mounted Cop, by Officer So-and-So, as told to Bernard W. Halper. A sure-fire hit. Now *do* something about it. That nice old cop is probably nearing retirement age. Depressed by the bleak prospect of it all. Okay, let's give him an exciting project to dream about. A literary collaboration that might well lead to fame and fortune.

Trying to suppress my excitement, I crossed to the curb. Then thinking that a reference to the cop's equine pal might break the conversational ice on a sympathetic note, I asked, "Arabian, isn't he?"

The cop turtled his head and appeared puzzled as he stared down at me. So I went on to explain I was referring to his horse. As if there were likely to be *other* Arabians hanging around on that mid-Manhattan block!

Anyway, the cop brushed his hand along the stallion's neck in a

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gesture of affection I thought was quite touching. "Yep," he said, "Sam's an Arabian."

I found myself exclaiming, *"Sam?"*

"The horse's name is Sam," the cop stated in a rather stiff manner. "Like mine is Quill. Like his is Hernandez." He indicated the beat patrolman who now paused near us, adding to him, "The Captain is personally checking the area. Just seen him ride by."

"Yeah, he's sure blowing his stack," Hernandez said gloomily. "Pressure from downtown. Cripes, all that Briefcase Bandit jazz over a heist artist with more luck than brains!"

I knew, of course, he was referring to something that's been in the newspapers for the past couple of weeks. The series of daylight stick-ups of small, one-man operated places in the Times Square area. Always the same m.o.: enters bandit, face disguised by oversized, tinted motorcycle goggles, gun in one hand, leather briefcase in the other. He stuffs the loot into the briefcase. Makes the proprietor or clerk lie down behind a counter. And takes off. Sole meager description of him: a man of average build, wearing a straw hat and seersucker suit.

For a while, not much of a flurry about the holdup man. Then there is one incident where the victim is able to crawl out of his shop only seconds after the bandit's departure. He sees a policeman, yelps he's just been robbed, and indicates a man—wearing a straw hat, seersucker suit, and carrying a briefcase—running up the street. That's him, officer—the guy who robbed me.

The cop gallops off in pursuit. Overtakes the man, and the suspect turns out to be a Ukranian delegate to the United Nations. There are red faces in high places. A threatened International Incident. The newspapers really start playing it up. An anonymous gunman acquires the monicker of The Briefcase Bandit. And he continues making headlines as he carries on daily his fabulously successful operation.

Both cops silent at the moment, I said, "If I may volunteer a theory, perhaps the bandit has been able to evade capture because he passes the briefcase containing the loot to a confederate waiting outside. Possibly someone dressed in innocent garb—like a clergyman."

More kind of brooding silence from the two cops. Then slab-faced Hernandez asked Quill, "Who's this screwball?"

"Let's find out," Quill said, shifting in the saddle as he looked down at me. "First, you get nosey if the horse is an Arabian. Then you do a flip when I tell you his name is Sam. Why?"

I had the sudden uneasy suspicion that maybe this was disintegrating before it even had a chance to jell. Shouldn't have shot my yap off about the Briefcase Bandit. Also I

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was wrong in my initial appraisal of that mounted cop. He was neither elderly nor did his leathery kisser bear the least vestige of the milk of human kindness. In fact, a very stern-looking cop.

"Well?" Quill prompted.

The answer, of course, was that I'd been startled by the incongruity of an Arabian stallion given the name of Sam. But that explanation would practically accuse Quill of being an unimaginative dope. So I said casually, "Oh, it's just that I thought he'd have a more exotic name." Then I figured I'd better change the subject with a quick conversational feint. And the first ad lib that popped up to my mind was, "How does Sam take to cold weather?"

Evidently, Quill didn't like that either. He sat there glowering at me. And when you look up at a cop glowering at you from a horse that could trample you to death, brother, you sure got something to worry about.

"You been smoking reefers?" he asked.

I stared at him. "Reefers?"

"You know what I mean. Weed. Marijuana."

Aghast, I said, "Why, officer, I don't even smoke *ordinary* cigarettes. Have a delicate stomach."

Old Dracula on horseback continued glaring at me. "There's got to be a reason," he rasped, "why you came over and asked stupid questions. You some kind of a wise guy? A comedian, maybe?"

Yes, this obviously was a lost cause with possibly dangerous overtones.

"Believe me, officer," I said, "I merely asked a simple point of information. Can't we sort of forget about it? I mean, it really isn't important."

Quill pushed up his peaked hat, exposing a rim cut on his forehead. "All right, damn it!" he said. "Why do *you* think Sam might not take to cold weather like any other horse takes to cold weather?"

"On account of him being an Arabian," I explained. "Arabian horses must be bred to withstand desert heat. Burning sky, burning sand. So it stands to reason Sam might be more unhappy in cold weather than horses bred in, say, Manitoba."

Hernandez said, "The kid's got a point, at that. Cold weather bother Sam?"

"So now I get stupid questions from you," Quill said in his biting manner.

Then Hernandez' voice took on a sharp edge as he snapped back, "What the hell is so stupid about it?"

"It's stupid," said Quill, "because animals get used to whatever climate they're born in. Sam was born in Jersey City. Same climate as New York. Like people. You think an Eskimo kid born in Florida is going to mind the heat more than the other kids?"

"An Eskimo kid born in Florida!"

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Hernandez jeered. "You talk about *me* being stupid?"

Sensing a growing and serious rift between the two cops, I thought I'd interject a bit of diplomacy. "All major circuses have winter quarters in Florida," I said. "Might conceivably employ real Eskimos in a seal act. But while it could be true what you said about Sam," I added directly to Quill, "I wouldn't include *all* animals. Take a monkey born in Jersey City. You let it out on a bitterly cold day, monkey is bound to catch pneumonia."

"Scram!" Quill snarled. "Beat it!"

There was such authority in the command, I made a jet-propelled take-off up the street. Narrowly avoided collision with the creepy Sandwich Sign Man. Saw the steps of the I.R.T. exit near the corner. And scooted down same, acting on some homing-pigeon security impulse.

A train was pulling out as I paid the toll at the turnstile. And I began to regain my equilibrium. Don't succumb to discouragement, Bernie, old boy, I thought. Such must be the breaks when in search for literary material. So it was just your darn luck to encounter a mounted cop who probably suffers with ulcers. Doesn't mean there aren't others with less choleric dispositions. To quote the Little Flower, patience and fortitude.

This philosophic outlook had a further steadying influence. Also, in retrospect, it all now seemed to be a pretty interesting experience. Even the ill-fated encounter with the Sandwich Sign Man. Both had elements of a mildly perilous adventure, and thus well worth the trip uptown.

Strolling along the platform, I proceeded to invent certain embellishments of the twin encounters for Joanie's benefit. Then heavy footsteps suggested an idle glance over my shoulder. And there was big, burly Hernandez hurrying in my direction. I gave him a polite nod of recognition, since I certainly hadn't had any unpleasantry with *him*.

And then ensued what I can only describe as pure, sheer madness.

Breathing heavily, the cop came straight for me. He grabbed my shoulder, swung me around. In the next moment I was stunned to feel my left wrist linked to Hernandez' hand by a chain-with-bars contraption.

I gasped bewildered protests. Hernandez advised me to come along quietly before I got clobbered. Immediate compliance seemed to be the better part of wisdom. And, well, there I *was,* a perfectly innocent citizen under arrest in a Gestapo-like manner, ignominiously half dragged along the station, through an exit gate, and up the steps.

We emerged into the street, where I instantly noted evidence of some dramatic occurrence. A police car parked in a bus stop area. Sam, now riderless, hitched to a No Parking

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sign. And a crowd of people in front of a store bearing on its window the romantic, if baffling, sign, "Granada Yarns and Notions."

With me in tow, Hernandez bulled his way through the sensation seekers on the sidewalk, and then on through the open entrance door. I had a moment in which to observe that "Granada Yarns and Notions" had no Castillian affiliation whatsoever—it was merely a place offering wares for women inclined to make with knitting or sewing needles. Another moment to spot Quill's kisser. Then my attention was focused on the interchange in progress between a hefty, purple-faced woman and an upper-echelon officer sporting gold braid.

"Just wait till the reporters get a load of *this,* Captain," the woman sounded off in a voice shrill with outrage. "Two cops right straight smack in *front* of my place. *Two* of them, mind you. One on a horse, the other on his big flat feet. And *still,* just as pretty as you please, the Briefcase Bandit takes off with almost two hundred dollars of my hard-earned money!"

This dramatic revelation temporarily drove from my mind the enigma of my enforced presence there. Why, I was literally on the scene of the Briefcase Bandit's latest exploit! What a *story* to relate to Joanie, *with* the double sockeroo of its verity later confirmed in the newspapers!

The Captain's face also had a purplish hue as he said, "Now, now, Mrs. Fiske, your place was listed among those the bandit might be likely to hit next. All patrolmen on this beat and plainclothesmen were instructed to look in as they passed by. A checkup every few minutes throughout the day. So had the two officers actually been nearby when the bandit—"

"I'm *telling* you," the woman interrupted, "they were directly across the sidewalk. Why, I can *see* them through the window, yakking away with some kid, just before the hoodlum makes me get down behind the counter. Then he pushes the counter so I'm squashed up against the wall, and he piles some yard goods on top of me. But I think the guy is trapped. A dead pigeon. The next cop who makes peek-a-boo at the window is going to be a hero. But, no, maybe thirty seconds later, his footsteps and the bell on the door tell me he's on his way out. So now I figure the bum had the lucky break of the two cops moving on. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't *anybody?"*

The Captain sighed and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Hah!" she snorted. "Takes me a little while to get clear from the squeeze I'm in. I run outside. Natch, by this time, the guy's gone. But the two *officers,* as you call 'em, are still there. And they give me stupid looks when I tell them that, for God's sake, the Briefcase Bandit just pulled a stickup right under

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their noses. Maybe the Mayor will explain to me, a taxpayer, how come we got such *idiots* on our police force!"

The embittered and derisive outburst, supported by irrefutable logic, created an unhappy silence. I envisioned the gold braid vanishing from the Captain's uniform, another rider for Sam, and Officers Quill and Hernandez pounding beats in remote areas where birdies chirp.

The Captain asked bleakly, "Straw hat, seersucker suit, briefcase?"

"That's him! Taking off from a place your men were supposed to keep an eye on. Now tell me, just *tell* me," she bellowed, revving up again, "how could he have sneaked past those two cops if they'd been paying attention to what's going on?"

And that cued my second phase of sheer madness. For Hernandez suddenly jerked the chain thing on my wrist, forcing me to take a stumbling step forward.

"There's your answer, Captain," Hernandez declared in a voice thick with anger. "Young Master Bright Eyes here who diverted us with a phoney act."

And a murderous scowl from Quill as he chimed in, "Right. As the bandit's lookout, he had to do something to give the guy a chance to sneak a getaway. And the nervy little punk pulled it off!"

Yes, sir, pure, sheer madness. Why, that was *me* they were talking about. Trying to frame *me* to save their own hides. Then I did a double-take that chilled me. The bandit, trapped and facing almost certain capture, *was* able to get away just *because* I'd diverted Quill and Hernandez with a conversation that got out of hand. The grim truth, and no getting around *that.*

The Captain was now looking me over. Boy, if Quill had a stern-looking kisser, the Captain outranked him on that too. A red-faced giant with bulldog jaw and the coldest, hardest eyes I have ever seen. Even if I convinced him I was a mere victim of unfortunate timing, he was still bound to take a mighty dim view of *me.* I mean, it hatched butterflies in the abdominal region.

"What kind of an act?" the Captain asked. "What did he do?"

Quill answered, "First he comes over and asked if Sam, my mount, is an Arabian. Then he puts up a beef that Sam ought to have a more exotic name. Then he tells us he knows how we could catch the Briefcase Bandit. We got to look, he says, for an accomplice dressed up like a priest. Fruitcake that he next caps by wanting to know how does Sam take to cold weather."

The Captain lifted shaggy eyebrows. "The *horse?*"

"Yes, sir. A question only a looney would think of asking. So we got to check out what gives with the punk. I finally decide he's a harmless screwball and tell him to scram. He scoots off like a scared rabbit and

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ducks down the subway steps. Which seems to be a tip-off that he *must* have pulled something on us. Only we can't figure out what the hell it could be—until Mrs. Fiske tells us what happened. Then it suddenly makes sense and Hernandez chases after him."

"And hit the jackpot," Hernandez added, "when I spot him on the subway platform."

An outrageously biased, garbled, and incomplete report. The Captain took time out to light a cigarette. And it gave me a breather to formulate some defensive strategy. Steady, Bernie, I thought. Set the record straight, but fast. A brief, simple, factual account. They can't *do* anything to you.

So I was in reasonable control of myself when the Captain clipped, "Okay, buster, start talking."

"Yes, sir," I said. "My name is Halper, Bernard W., and I live on Waverly Place down in the Village. This afternoon I just happened to stroll uptown and I paused to admire Officer Quill's horse. I asked if he was an Arabian. When told his name was Sam, I expressed mild surprise that an Arabian stallion wasn't given a more exotic name. Then I wondered if Arabian horses, bred to withstand desert heat, might be more uncomfortable during New York winters than horses bred in northern climates. And I inquired how Sam takes to cold weather."

Honest to God, that Captain could brain-wash you just by boring in with those cold, hard eyes of his. Because even to *me* the explanation I'd given suddenly seemed ridiculous. A more exotic name for an Arabian stallion! Heck, a horse is a horse. Furthermore, Sam *wasn't* a recent immigrant from the Sahara, which *might* legitimately have aroused curiosity as to his reaction to cold weather.

"Let's cut out the malarkey," the Captain said curtly. "How did you get involved with this Briefcase Bandit character?"

"I'm not," I protested, my voice rising to a higher register. "I mean, absolutely all I know about him is what I've read in the newspapers."

"But you had ideas on how we could catch him? That why you approached the two officers?"

A feint to shake my story, but I stuck to my guns, if such they were at this point. "No, sir," I said, "my sole interest was Sam. However, Officer Hernandez made some gloomy comments about the Briefcase Bandit. It was then I volunteered the theory that perhaps he's been able to evade capture because he passes over the briefcase with the loot to a confederate waiting outside. Possibly someone dressed in the innocent garb of a clergyman."

And that also now sounded *stupid,* apparent doubletalk deliberately meant to divert those two cops. Why, a clergyman idly hanging around near some mid-Manhattan shop would automatically attract attention to himself. If the Briefcase

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Bandit *had* an accomplice, *of course* it would be someone inconspicuous —in an ordinary business suit. Honestly, I could practically hear the thin ice crackling and cracking under my feet.

The Captain shifted to a mild tone of voice. "Halper, *you* know that *I* know you're lying. Now you're a smart kid. An educated kid. Maybe you went into this for kicks. Or the guy has some hold over you. But you're protecting a gunman. On his next job someone might get killed. You want that on your conscience? You want to get involved in a murder rap?"

"Think of your mother!" Mrs. Fiske interjected dramatically.

An unhappy suggestion, reminding me that Mom and Pop were still en route to Albany, unavailable to lend a helping hand. And I also had the awful feeling I'd have a rough time convincing even *them,* my very own parents, that I'd started the ill-fated conversation with Quill merely to promote a literary collaboration. If I dared tell the Captain that, I'd be *lucky* if I was only hauled off to some Snake Pit of a psycho ward.

"All right, son, get it off your chest," the Captain continued. "You're going to talk anyway, sooner or later. Save yourself some grief and do it now."

The implied threat did not have to be spelled out to me. Blinding lights, pounding questions, hour after hour, reducing me to gibbering imbecile, perhaps *permanently* to remain that way. Honestly! My bitterness at the moment extended even to embrace Joanie, indirectly responsible for the trip uptown. And, too, that anti-social creep of a Sandwich Man. If he'd *only* given me just a few minutes of his time—

"Last call, Halper!" the Captain clipped. "You going to start talking?"

He had dropped the low-keyed paternal pitch, now looming big and mean. I felt tremors wavering upward from my legs. Dream up something, Bernie, I thought desperately. Quick. Anything. Then a glimmer of an idea flickered in the cerebral region. No time to kick it around. It had to be a headlong plunge into a murky pool of unknown depth.

"I must confess now, sir," I began, "I'd only pretended an interest in Officer Quill's horse. Stalled with stupid questions because I was reluctant to make a most serious accusation on rather flimsy evidence. Then I compromised by suggesting to the two officers that the bandit's accomplice might be a *clergyman.* Just to test their reaction to the idea of it perhaps being a *two*-man operation. When I found they didn't think much of my theory, I realized I must be wrong, and didn't pursue the matter any further."

The Captain's face was purplish again as he glared at me. *"What* matter? What the hell are you talking about?"

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Mentally crossing fingers, I said, "The Sandwich Sign Man who I thought was a phoney because his face had the gray pallor of someone confined to indoors work. A tall man with a shock of gray hair, carrying signs advertising bargains in men's clothing offered by Mr. Saul Harris. He was standing maybe a dozen feet from the entrance to this shop."

"Yeah, I saw him," Quill said. "That's Murphy. He's been around for years. And he's pale because he just spent a couple of months in an alcoholic ward in Bellevue."

A setback even before I got started. Then I did a double-take and said, "Murphy?"

"You think like Sam he ought to have a more exotic name?" Quill asked sarcastically.

"No, sir," I replied, "but someone named Murphy would surely know English. Yet when I asked a question, he snarled back, 'No speaka de English. Goomby.' Now it's obvious he wanted to get rid of me so that he might sidle over to the entrance door and relieve the bandit of the briefcase stuffed with the loot, gun, and tinted motorcycle goggles."

Boy, the angry scepticism on the Captain's face was of chilling portent. The butterflies in my stomach increased in size, number, and state of agitation. *Keep talking,* Bernie, I thought frantically. Before you're accused of lunacy, real or faked. There *must* be some semblance of sense to your reasoning.

So I took a deep breath and plunged into my pitch. Possession of the incriminating briefcase, I pointed out, was the biggest risk the bandit ran. Too bulky an object to conceal under his coat. If he passed it on to an accomplice waiting outside, it would still leave a briefcase-toting suspect fleeing from the scene of the crime. Not so, however, in the unique advantage enjoyed by Murphy. The briefcase *instantly* vanishes from sight behind one of the signs shielding his body. Probably the reason why the bandit *continued* using a briefcase. Convenience of a handle that Murphy could attach to some hook arrangement on his belt.

Furthermore, I went on, Murphy was ideally suited to case jobs for the bandit. Intimate knowledge of an area he's worked in for years carrying those signs. A familiar sight to shopkeepers. No suspicion aroused when, seemingly resting, he checks the interior of some small business establishment. If things look right, a nod to the bandit skulking nearby. A moment in which to pass over the briefcase containing the gun and goggles. Then the quick hit-and-run stickup, and out. Murphy deftly snatches and whisks out of sight the briefcase now fattened with loot. Off their separate ways they go, later to rendezvous for a divvy-up. Simple, yet ingenious and effective.

I paused, looked around hopefully. And found I still had a very cold and hostile audience indeed.

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"Nuts," Quill rasped, "everybody knows Murphy is a crackpot and a rummy. No one in his right senses would team up with him."

Precisely my own view, too. In rather pathetic rebuttal I suggested, "It hasn't been established, sir, that the bandit is a rational person. And Murphy, leading a double life, might have found it expedient to *pretend* he's a——"

"All right, Halper, you asked for it," the Captain cut in. He added to Hernandez, "Take him out to my car."

Here we go, Bernie, I thought. Off to the slaughter. The chain business tugged at my wrist. My poor rubbery legs made a stumbling response. Then a police siren outside dwindled to a moan. There were some sounds of commotion. And I stared, goggled-eyed, at the procession now filing into the shop.

First, a huge fat man carrying a briefcase. Next, Murphy, minus his signs, upper part of his body clad in filthy underwear. He was handcuffed to a third man wearing a straw hat and wrinkled seersucker suit. Two uniformed cops brought up the rear.

Stunned silence, until the fat man said in a voice wheezy from exertion or excitement, "Captain, I'm going to look up the guy who last week tried to sell me a ticket for the Irish Sweepstakes."

The Captain sort of shook himself and said, "Buy one for me. How did you nab 'em?"

"Well, I'm walking down Sixth Avenue. There's Murphy shuffling along ahead of me. Suddenly he veers over to a guy standing in front of a barber shop. I see it's Eddie Vail, a hood who ain't exactly a stranger to us. Then Murphy sticks out his arm from between his signs, *and* he's holding a briefcase that he passes over to Vail. Two plus two makes four. I signal a passing prowl car and I crack down on 'em. When I check the briefcase—by God, that's *it!* Murphy confessed the loot came from here."

Beaming happily, he paused to draw a handkerchief and begin a mop-up operation on his moonlike face.

Only now I was hit by the full impact of my miraculous last-moment reprieve. And the implications therefrom. The Briefcase Bandit captured. My reasoning absolutely correct. The status of respect with those cops. Possible consultations on other baffling cases. The more exciting career of a criminologist? I glanced at Eddie Vail and Murphy, representing my first triumph, so to speak. And I could see why Vail used only the tinted motorcycle goggles as a disguise. While his face was totally nondescript, he had the hooded, flat, cold eyes of a killer.

"Anyway, that's how they worked it, Captain," the fat man continued. "A smart trick. Passing the briefcase back and forth——"

"I know all about that," the Captain interrupted.

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"Yeah, you know all about it," Mrs. Fiske jeered in her shrill voice, "because the kid figured it out for you."

"No, ma'm," the Captain denied coldly, "he just had the dumb luck of guessing what I suspected all along. I'd assigned Sergeant Klein to shadow Murphy. Right, Klein?"

The fat man blinked and said, "Yes, sir."

Eddie Vail, addressing Murphy with cold fury, said, "You nitwit, I *told* you never to pass over the briefcase until you got the high sign from me. Hell, I would have spotted that dick."

"Sorry, Eddie," Murphy whined, "but the punk there got me nervous. Asked a dopey question, then went over to talk to the two cops. So I thought maybe he was on to something."

Vail's hooded killer's eyes gave me an ominous I'll-be-seeing-you-some-day look. As I kind of shriveled within myself, I heard the Captain ask, "What did you say to Murphy?"

"What?" I said. "Oh, I merely inquired how much his signs weighed."

No rational reason why *that* should have prompted a venomous glare from him, but it did. "Get *out* of here!" he said in a strained voice. "Quick, before I change my mind! Go on, *beat it!*"

I shied away, was momentarily checked by the chain on my wrist, then released. And I plunged out of the place, giving the sensation seekers on the sidewalk more food for speculation. Half way down the block I slowed to a walk, my numbed brain beginning to function again.

It hadn't been some weird nightmare. Literally *happened*. Yet it defied sane appraisal. Why, just take the baffling behavior of that police captain. In unnerving Murphy to disregard Vail's instructions, *I* was directly responsible for the Briefcase Bandit's capture. My reward? Hit the road, you punk!

Not that I wanted any medals pinned on me. That wasn't the *point*. After all, what could have been more innocent than my reason for contacting Quill? An effort to enrich my life as a writer. Surely, a commendable ambition. And look what happened. I mean, I've always assumed a certain reasonable cause-and-effect predictability. Now *that* pretty little illusion was rudely shattered for all time.

It set off another dismal train of thought. About Joanie. I couldn't see her all of last week-end because, she said, she was duty bound to entertain her cousin Gerald, a Princeton sophomore. He's a perfect drip, Bernie, she'd assured me, a square from Squaresville. I'd naively accepted it, but that was before I'd learned the bitter lesson in Granada Yarns and Notions. *Duty bound* to bat around with a drip the *entire* week-end? Ridiculous. No, she was probably nuts about the guy. Daily

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letters with X's beneath her signature. Me, I was just kept on the string until the glamor boy from Princeton made his next visit to New York.

Well, even that might now be of short duration. Mrs. Fiske heard me give the Captain my name and address. Some vengeance-minded pal of Eddie Vail, posing as a reporter, worms that information out of her. And I get my head blown off!

Yes, sir, I was a defeated, embittered, and cynical character as I made the dreary return trek down Seventh Avenue. The transition from a would-be literary bloke to a could-be neurotic. Presently, I found myself entering Washington Square, some corner of my mind evidently recalling I was to meet Joanie there. Actually, I had no desire to see her, but, to quote the poet, a promise made is a debt unpaid.

Joanie was waiting on our usual rendezvous bench facing the fountain. I approached, settled down next to her. And was instantly aware, a pang in my heart, how pretty she looked. Radiant. Little wonder the Big Shot from Princeton made special trips to New York. Lovely Joanie. Oh, well.

She silenced the little transistor radio on her lap, smiled and said, "I'm all ears, Bernie. Tell me about your thrilling adventures uptown."

Amusement in her eyes. Entertain me, Bernie. Well, the heck with *that!*

"Naw, nothing happened," I replied with churlish curtness. "A dull waste of time."

She sat up, her face stiffening, the smile gone. "Then you weren't *fooling* about going uptown. And something *did* happen, and you want to be secretive about it."

I blinked and said, "Now what kind of dopey feminine reasoning is that?"

"It isn't dopey," she said, "because I *know* you, Bernie. I can tell you're holding back something from me."

Fluff it off, Bernie, I thought. This is too painful. "No," I said, "it's just that I'm still skeptical about information I learned uptown. Met some underworld character who said the grapevine has it that the notorious Briefcase Bandit has been captured."

A stark, frozen look on Joanie's face, then, "But it's true," she gasped. "Why, I heard it on the radio when I saw you coming up the path. A news bulletin you couldn't possibly have——" To my utter astonishment, tears suddenly filled her lovely blue eyes. "Bernie, I'm *losing* you," she went on in a broken voice. "Your mysterious trips uptown. Consorting with criminals. Gee, Bernie, I just don't know what I'd *do* if—if something broke us up. Because you know how I feel about you."

Now I knew. Misery left. Joy surged in. There *was* no Lover Boy in Princeton. The *heck* with every-

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thing that happened in Granada Yarns and Notions. Life was good and rich and wonderful. I put my arm around Joanie and assured her she was my own true love and nothing ever, *ever* was going to break us up. She sighed, snuggled closer, and placed her head on my shoulder.

Heavenly bliss. A long step forward from our usual adolescent puppy love. A new and golden interlude of poignant tenderness, understanding. And it wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the Briefcase Bandit. I mean, it was something to think about, if I wanted to think about it, which I didn't. My beloved was with me, steadfast and true, and nothing else mattered . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**EDWIN P. HICKS**
TITLE:	***Town Hero***
TYPE:	Cop Story à la **Black Mask**
COP:	Joe Chaviski
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*It was Joe's last day on the force. He wanted to tour the main street on foot and say goodbye to all his friends . . . and the memories of 30 years crowded in.*

AT FOUR O'CLOCK THE BOYS AT THE police station were throwing a farewell party for me, Joe "Killer" Chaviski. At five o'clock I would hang up my badge and gun, and my 30 years of police work would end officially. The city would have to get another "six-gun executioner." Down through the years ten men had died at my hand—ten men—lawbreakers, criminals, hoods, but they were men—men who had lived, who had loved, perhaps . . .

Lucy had hated my work. How glad Lucy would have been to see this day; but Lucy had been dead now for more than five years.

Chief O'Toole had given me orders to stay away from the department until four o'clock. I was to make the avenue on foot, say goodbye to my friends on Garrison Avenue—our main street. The Chief hadn't said anything about the party—it was all to be a big surprise.

Two hundred and fifty-five pounds of beef and 51 years don't make walking easy. By 10:00 a.m. I was limping and sweating a regular stream. It was the old service wound in my leg and the hot August day, I tried to convince myself. But I knew better. In the past ten years I had grown calluses on my tail, pushing down the cushions of a prowl car. For ten years, as Chief of detectives, I had been ordering younger officers to get off their fan-

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nies, while I kept sitting on my own.

At the Sportsman, Charlie Connors growled, "Hi, Joe."

"Hi-yah, Charlie. How's my boat?"

"You let the boys know I told you they was buying you a boat, and I'll punch your nose."

"You and who else?"

"Nobody, you big tub of fat. I won't punch your nose, I'll wrap an oar around your thick skull."

We shook hands.

"What you going to do? Fish every day?"

"Every day until I get tired. She's sure a beauty. You sure this is the one they got me?"

"Not this one you dumb flatfoot, but one just like it. And the fellows up and down the street kicked in the outboard motor and the trailer."

"They shouldn't have done it."

"Why not? It ain't every police officer who has done as much for this town as you. I can see you now, a rookie cop, directing traffic at Sixth and Garrison, the day after you killed those two bank robbers when they come out of the First National."

"Well, why not? That was my job every Saturday morning, directing traffic at Sixth and Garrison."

"You could—but not me," said Charlie. "I wouldn't have gotten over the shakes for six months. Say, Joe, something I didn't tell you. They painted the name Lucy on the boat. Figured you'd like that."

"Yes," I said, "I like that."

At the street corner a police cruiser pulled up into the yellow loading zone. It was Johnson and Sauer, plainclothesmen.

"Get the hell out of that loading zone before I give you a ticket," I said.

Sauer looked mean. "If this was tomorrow, old man, I'd run you in for vagrancy."

"On with you two. Until five o'clock today I'm still giving you orders."

They drove off grinning, and Johnson thumbed his nose, making it look like he was scratching.

Good boys, Johnson and Sauer. But they had taken a lot of breaking in. As a rookie, Johnson was as wild as a young mustang, and Sauer wasn't much better. There was that time before the cars had two-way radio and officers were required to call in on a telephone on the hour. After their 2:00 a.m. call-in one night, the two young idiots had gone out on the municipal golf course and went to sleep—each rolling up in a blanket they had smuggled into their car, and with an alarm clock set to go off in an hour, placed close to their heads. For some reason the alarm failed, and when Sauer woke up the sun was shining brightly down on them. "Get up, Johnson, get up!" Sauer yelled. "Here it is daylight, and we're working overtime!"

They would have been discharged, but I went to the mayor. "They are good boys, Jim," I said. "Now you

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look back a few years on some of the things you did—yes and right out there on that golf course too. I can remember the time when—"

Mayor Langley held up his hand. "No need to go into details, Joe. Tell them it's a ten-day suspension—and eat them out properly."

"I won't even use mustard," I'd promised the mayor . . .

"Back on the beat!" said Sam Gurney. "You look real good pounding the sidewalk. It will take some of that fat off you. Come here, Joe Chaviski, I give you dinner free today." Sam stuck out his hand, then grimaced and grabbed with his other one.

"I may be fat, but I'm man enough to handle you any day in the week. No, thank you, Sam. It's too early for dinner. But I'm taking a rain check on that invitation."

"Okay. Anytime you down this way."

I hobbled on. My feet were killing me. A man as big as me shouldn't be walking . . .

Hack Vestry. Who said Hack Vestry? Hack Vestry was dead! He died with a bullet through his heart as he came running out of the First National, a sack of currency in his left hand, a blazing .45 in his right. I was a rookie patrolman, had just walked a drunk over to the city jail, and was turning the corner of the bank, getting back on my beat, when Vestry came out wild-eyed and trigger-happy. Vestry got off four rapid shots, spraying the cornerstone of the bank building, breaking out a window in the second story of the First Federal Savings and Loan across the street, and blasting the air with his other two shots. I pulled my .38 Police Special and shot Vestry through the heart.

Choc Dugan. Choc Dugan always came out of the grave every time Vestry did. He had come running out of the bank three jumps behind Vestry. His first bullet took the lower half of the lobe of my left ear. Then Choc fell with a bullet between his eyes. The city paid for sewing up my ear, but I was out a dollar that it took to clean the blood off my new uniform.

It was something to take a man's life—to take two men's lives—even though they were bank robbers and trying to kill me instead of being killed. But I was young then, and the killings didn't bother me too much. And it was nice seeing my name in the paper for the first time—nice seeing the big black headline on the front page telling about the bank robbery and gun battle—nice seeing my picture in the paper, with the word "hero" written beneath it. No, Hack Vestry and Choc Dugan didn't bother me too much then. It was only in recent years they'd been rising from their graves . . .

It was getting hotter and hotter, and the weight of the .38 caused my gun belt to chafe my flesh and make it burn. It was the same gun I had used in killing the bank robbers.

At noon, sweating and limping,

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I lumbered into the lobby of the Gold Hotel. Big Dan Ferguson, the manager, linked an arm through mine, and escorted me to the coolest corner of the coffee shop. "You ought to pay for my dinner instead of me paying for yours," Dan said. "The Rotarians are meeting in the Marine Room, and if they caught sight of you they'd make you give them a farewell speech."

"Thanks, Dan. I really appreciate it. That sun's really bearing down out there today."

Dan snapped his fingers and ordered for me: Italian meat balls and spaghetti—and plenty of it—with a fruit cup to start with, a pitcher full of milk, and a heaped-up saucer of vanilla ice cream.

"How does it feel, Joe, to be a free man once more?"

"I don't know Dan, but I'm sure gonna find out."

"Going to drown some worms, I hear." Dan's face was beaming, and I knew that he was bursting to tell me about the boat and outboard and trailer, but he didn't say a word.

Later, when I walked out of the air-conditioned hotel coffee shop, moisture congealed on my spectacles. I took the glasses off, wiped them, and squinted down the long stretch of Garrison Avenue.

A police car pulled up to the curb, and Officer Frankie Hopp signaled me. "It's Shorty Howell," Hopp said. "He's been drinking and is out of control. Chief said to pick you up and help take a look around."

"Where'd you get the call—his wife?"

"Yes, Anna just phoned the office."

"Move over," I said. "Let's go have a talk with Anna. She say whether he was driving a cab or waiting tables?"

"He's driving a cab—cab Number 264."

We drove down to a ratty-looking frame house on River Street. Anna Howell had two black eyes and was wringing her hands. "He's drinking and mixing it with goof balls," she said. "Beat me up and took off in his cab twenty minutes ago. He never used to drive his cab when he was high, but it don't make no difference with him any more."

"You still love Shorty, Anna?" I asked.

"Yes, I do, Mr. Chaviski. Don't hurt him."

"Hurt him? I'll slap his mouth through the back of his head. Never did know why you put up with that little stinker."

"That's all right, Mr. Chaviski. Just don't kill him."

"He wasn't carrying a gun, was he?"

"I don't know, Mr. Chaviski. I was on the floor, out cold, when he left." Anna searched the chest of drawers which stood next to the bed. She turned pathetically then and looked at me, and the drawn skin of her cheeks and forehead were in sharp contrast to the discoloration around her eyes. "Shorty

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had a gun, and it's *gone*. But don't shoot him, please, Mr. Chaviski. You know Shorty wouldn't hurt a flea when he's in his right mind."

"Like you say, Anna." I couldn't help but be kind to the poor woman. "When Shorty's in his right mind he's a good guy."

We radioed the station and then started out looking for Shorty's cab, crossing the river and driving past the taverns out there. Then we returned and made several other establishments which I knew were Shorty's hangouts when he was liquored up.

Hopp hadn't been on the force too long. "Let me tell you about Shorty," I said. "Don't take no chances with him, no more than you would a wildcat. You get in reaching distance of him, just knock him cold. Don't you try to be nice to him. Use your slapper if you can get to it. He'll walk right up your front, hitting and kicking and scratching. He'll use a broken bottle on you, a chair—anything he can lay his hands on."

"That's what the Chief said. But I'd hate to hit a little guy like Shorty."

"Hate hell! You wait until you've tangled with him. I've got more scars all over my body from that little paperweight fighting cock than I have from all the big guys I ever went up against. You'll learn! Well, looks like we ain't going to find Mr. Howell. Just take me back where you picked me up and let me out. I'm making all the places on the avenue. I may run into Shorty. But if you find him first, call me before you try to handle him. Understand? Don't tackle him without me. I know that little guy!"

Hopp let me out in the 1100 block on Garrison. The ride had put some stiffness into my old legs to add to my misery. Both heels now were blistered, and they burned like fire every step. I wondered how much weight I had lost since starting my morning stroll. It was a hell of a task for a man even to quit a police force. But I did want to say goodbye to all my old friends.

I was on the sunny side of the street. Perspiration popped out on my forehead and ran down, blurring my glasses. I thought about Shorty Howell, and that tired me more. For ten years I had watched Shorty sink lower and lower, and Shorty no longer was a kid. He was in his forties now, and a ladies' man. Shorty's hair, coal-black when I first knew him, had turned white almost overnight—and now it was a white white. Some of the girls said Shorty had it bleached regularly in a beauty parlor.

The little devil wasn't over five feet two inches tall, even with the two-inch heels he wore to make him look taller, and he was slender and trim—a miniature man. And somewhere within him Shorty had the instincts of a gentleman. He always dressed snappily and always was as neat and clean as a newly minted

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silver dollar, whether he was in his tailored taxicab driver's uniform or wearing his black waiter's suit with black bow tie and a stiff shirt so white you could almost see your face in it.

And yet I knew there wasn't a milder, kinder man in town than Shorty Howell—that is, when he wasn't drinking. In the past he had fought the habit valiantly. And in the old days when Shorty did get plastered, he had always turned his cab back to the lot before the liquor took effect—thus preserving his license; or if he was doing a spell of waiting on tables, he never got rowdy around the place where he worked. But Anna always caught it later on, when he was sobering up.

Recently Shorty had gone overboard for yellow jackets and goof balls. What Anna had told me confirmed what others were saying—that Shorty Howell was getting to be downright mean. Shorty, full of liquor with a broken beer bottle in his hand, was a tough proposition, but Shorty, full of dope and liquor at the same time and with a gun in his hand—that was something I had hoped never to see, or any of my boys.

The sun felt ten degrees hotter by the end of the block. I stopped in at Randall's Drug Store for some ice water, then decided to have another dish of vanilla ice cream. Vanilla ice cream is a favorite of mine . . .

Dan McCaudle. Why did I have to think about him? Why didn't Dan McCaudle stay in the grave where he belonged? Perhaps it was seeing Anna Howell in her gloomy little rathole of an apartment, with her ghostly white face and blackened eyes. It had been 25 years now—a whole quarter of a century—since I had gone into McCaudle's house, stepping over the body of Mrs. McCaudle, who was lying face up across the threshold, with a thick crimson circle all around her and a big hole in her chest. Dan was still firing as I went through the door. A chip of wood leaped from the side of the door, and there was a hot burning blast from McCaudle's spouting six-gun in my face. I was suddenly like water in the knees and warm liquid began spurting from my throat. But as I fell I squeezed the trigger once, twice, three times, and saw McCaudle's eyes suddenly glaze as they stared into the sunlight streaming in through the door. The ambulance boys saved my life that time. McCaudle was dead, they said, by the time he crashed to the floor . . .

The ice cream tasted good—as good as the ice cream I used to lick from the old-fashioned freezer Lucy used to make ice cream at home. I always did like ice cream, especially vanilla.

Fred Martin pushed back the coin I offered him. "After today, Big Boy," Fred growled in mock anger, "I'll take you for every dime you got. What you mean retiring and leaving this town unprotected?

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Whatta we going to do when some real bad man gets gun-happy? Who we got on the force that can take him?"

"We got a lot of good boys on the force, Fred. They'll come through when they run up against something like that."

Between Seventh and Sixth streets a reporter and a cameraman from the local paper cornered me. They said they had been looking all around for me. The reporter was Billy Thomas, a pretty good kid—as reporters go. I went with them to the Chamber of Commerce, and there, after having shaken hands with the staff, I sat down and Billy began firing questions.

"I've been doing some research on you, Joe. How many men have you killed?"

"I don't like that word."

"I didn't mean it that way, Joe. You know me better than that. I've been a good friend of yours always, and you know it."

That was true. He had always been fair, and he had never called me "Killer" as some of the hard-nosed reporters had in the old days. "I've had to put away ten men in the course of my thirty years on the force. Ten men died—and I regret every one of them."

"But if you ran into the same situation again?"

"I never shot a man unless I had to. I was the law. They were trying to kill me. The only thing I am proud of is that as long as I was the target, some other officer wasn't getting shot at."

"They told me at the station that you had a standing order with all the men under you that if they had a dangerous man cornered to send word to you and to hold off until you got there."

"Well, wouldn't you expect any department head to do the same thing? An experienced officer has a far better chance of living through such a thing than an inexperienced one."

"The amazing thing about you, Joe, the way I've been able to piece the story together, is that you're not especially fast with a gun—nor did you ever win any awards on the pistol range for accuracy."

"That's right."

"Then how do you explain your remarkable record?"

"I don't like to think of it as a record. What I did I had to do. It was my duty. I'm not proud of it." The kid was nettling me a little. "But if you mean how did I manage to live through ten showdowns—you don't have to be a good shot to hit a thing as big as a man at ten feet if you don't get excited until *after* the shooting is over."

"Then what is your advice to a young officer about gunfights?"

"Avoid them."

"But sometimes they can't be avoided. You know that yourself."

I nodded. "Yes, but anything I say now won't help another man when he's looking down the barrel of a

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gun in the hands of a guy who's so scared he's gone plumb crazy. Either he gets the other fellow that first fight and learns something about what it takes—or the other fellow gets him. And then maybe he won't have to worry about anything like that any more. After a man muddles through the first couple of times he prays to God he'll never have to go through it again. That's all I can tell you, Billy."

"Joe, how does it feel to be quitting the force after thirty years?"

"Wonderful!"

The cameraman saw his opportunity and took a flash just as I said that. I guessed the picture would come out showing me grinning like an ape.

"What are you going to do now, Joe?"

"Going fishing. Going to fish until I'm tired of fishing. Gonna spend a whole month on the lakes and fish every day and listen to the birds and look up at the sky and—well, kinda get acquainted again with the way a small boy feels before he grows up and takes on a man's responsibilities."

Billy nodded. "I can understand that."

I had bluffed my way through that interview without revealing too much of my true feelings. A few more questions, and I might have cracked and said things I later would have regretted. If Billy had asked, "Would you be a policeman if you were starting over again and knew what you know now?" I might have cracked.

In recent years I had regretted the day I had first put on a policeman's uniform. I regretted the day that I had walked the drunk to the city jail and returned just in time to come around the corner of the bank into the blazing guns of Hack Vestry and Choc Dugan. I wish now I had thrown down my gun and run. That way I never would have developed a reputation as the department's gunfighter—the fellow they always sent for when lead was going to fly. I never would have had to hear the word "killer" whispered behind my back. I regretted the death of Dan McCaudle—and all the rest—Tobe Compton, Banjo Levetti, Slim Hoffmeier, the Indian—Chief Cooney—all of them . . .

Now I had got past Fifth Street, and my .38 felt as if it weighed fifty pounds as it hung high and tight against my right hip. I was nearing the end of my last long mile as a police officer, as a Chief of detectives. It was now two o'clock, and the sun shining down on my forehead looked like a molten blotch in a copper-colored sky. My shirt was wet through, and I was chafing between the legs, where my shorts were drawn up and twisted.

I thought of Lucy now—Lucy who had gone through nearly 25 of the 30 years I had spent as a police officer, including the years allowed for service during the war. Lucy had been as fine a wife as any man

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could ever have. She took as good care of me as if I were her baby. In fact, her pet name for me, when nobody was around, was "Babe." What the boys at the station would have said if they had known that! I had never discussed with Lucy the men I'd had to kill in line of duty. But she had been right there doctoring me and nursing me whenever a gunman's bullet had put me in bed.

Lucy had begged me, ten years before, to take my retirement and get out of police work. But by that time it had seemed to me too late to take up anything else. I tried to explain to Lucy that staying on the force for another five years meant an automatic raise in salary, and a raise in the amount of pension I would receive. But before the five years were up I had run into Neal and Johnny Rapport, brothers and professional safe-knockers, in the act of sledging a drug store safe. A tipoff from a stoolie and a week's stakeout had paid off. The two pulled their guns and started shooting, but I was lucky and both were dead by the time they reached the hospital. It happened just a month after they buried Lucy. She had never had a strong heart—and it wore out shortly before the end of my five-year extended stint on the force. Thank God, Lucy didn't know about Neal and Johnny.

With Lucy gone and the house empty as a tomb—we had no children—I had gone on for another five years on the force, and there was one more shooting. A cowboy named Harley Evans, who hailed from Montana, was in town and a contestant in the local rodeo. During a crap game back of the rodeo corral, while a performance was under way, Evans pulled a gun and began shooting wildly, endangering innocent people crowded in the stands. I had had to stop Evans, and it took a bullet to do it.

The .38-calibre Police Special rubbing against my hip was a repulsive thing to me—an evil thing. With this weapon I had taken the lives of ten men. It was as heavy as a guillotine now as it hung there digging into my flesh. I hated that gun, even though it had never failed me in a tight spot. If it had failed only once, my worries would be over and I would now be with Lucy . . .

It was nearly three o'clock now, and I had shaken the last hand and had reached the west end of Garrison Avenue. In two hours I wouldn't be a police officer any longer. I would never have to kill another man. I was practically a free man right now. There was one thing I had been promising myself for a long time. The time had come to keep that promise.

I started walking still farther westward along the bridge toward the blazing sun. Most of the feeling had long since gone out of my legs. My knees were wobbly, but the blisters on my heels had stopped stinging—and there was a warmness

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about the back of my heels that felt like matted blood. And the back of my heels were swelling.

I plodded a full block and a half out on the bridge until I was out over the deep channel. Then, when there was no one in sight, I slipped my .38 from the holster, held it at arm's length out over the deep, muddy water, and turned the evil thing loose. Several seconds passed, then I heard the splash, saw the waves spreading out in a circle, far below. That gun would never take another human life.

I turned and looked back eastward along the 1300 block of Garrison Avenue, which I had traversed both ways during the long, hot day, and it seemed to me that I was looking at my home town for the very first time. It was almost like being a stranger. No longer did the streets and the sidewalks threaten me with the call of duty. Never again would I have to keep my ear attuned to the police radio or the telephone for the voice that would summon me to kill.

Thank God, my killing days were over—and it seemed that Lucy was walking along by my side, holding my hand. There would be time for one more dish of cooling vanilla ice cream in the restaurant at the end of the avenue. Then I would make my last official call to the station—order them to come and pick me up, so I could report off duty for the last time.

A convertible, filled with happy teenagers, three boys and three girls, met me, and all the kids waved and shouted. I waved back, for I was just as young in spirit now as the youngest of them.

Then it happened.

Not one hundred feet behind me on the bridge came the hideous crash of two cars ramming together. I whirled to see the convertible, two wheels spinning in the air, on its side across the right-hand sidewalk, with the spewing radiator smashed through the concrete balustrade of the bridge. Upright, but jammed tightly into the wreckage, was a taxicab, with the number 264 showing.

A couple of the kids lay still, one in the center of the bridge, one partly on the sidewalk. The four others were picking themselves up. A frightened girl, blood streaming down her face, was screaming hysterically.

I ran toward the wrecked cars, all the tiredness vanished from my old legs. And there was Shorty Howell.

The diminutive cab driver, his white hair hanging down over his black eyes, was crawling out of the cab, and in his hand was a .45 automatic. He began shooting at the teenagers. One boy turned and fled like a frightened jack rabbit, but the others cowered down against the wreckage of the convertible, too frightened or too injured to run.

"Stop it, Shorty! Stop it or I'll have to kill you!" I screamed as I ran toward the crazed driver. I felt

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for my gun. It was gone! It was resting beneath ten feet of muddy river water.

Shorty Howell was screeching like a crazy, frightened woman. "You damn teenagers! You wrecked my cab!" He first saw me when I was about fifty feet away. He pointed the muzzle of his heavy automatic toward me, holding the gun with both hands. My left arm went limp, but I kept on my feet, kept running toward Shorty.

"Cut it, Shorty! Cut it out! You don't want to hurt anybody!"

"Killer! Killer Chaviski!" Shorty screamed. He fired again, and I felt the shock of the steel-jacketed bullet as it ripped through my right side, whirling me around and causing me to zigzag out of stride. This probably saved my life, because Shorty missed twice more.

I staggered on toward Shorty, and a hot blast from the .45 seared my face as my right hand reached out and my fingers went around Shorty's tiny neck. The little man's reactions were exactly like a cat, as he heeled me in the groin with both feet, smashing and ripping at my head with the heavy automatic.

We went down together and I collapsed on top of Shorty.

When Johnson and Sauer got there, they said they had to force my hand loose from Shorty Howell's neck, and when my grip was finally broken, Shorty's head fell back between his shoulder blades. They said he looked like a rag doll with its head almost pulled off. Poor Shorty!

When I came to next day in the hospital, I found I was still a member of the police department—an honorary member with full powers and authority to arrest, but no duty requirements whatever for the rest of my life. The mayor and the Chief of Police wanted it that way.

And then one day a delegation of teenagers poured into my room at the hospital. Six of them were the youngsters who had been shaken up in the collision with Shorty Howell's taxicab. They had taken up a collection among kids their age throughout the city, they said, and they had bought me a present.

I opened the brightly wrapped gift package to find a brand-new .38-calibre Police Special revolver. There was an inscription engraved along the blue-steel barrel: *To Joe Chaviski, Our Protector. May this never leave his side.*

★ ★ ★

NEXT MONTH . . .

***New* detective short novel—complete!**

RUFUS KING's *The Caesar Complex*

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A subtly conceived and skillfully written story about the persecution of the Colonel, and how the Colonel doggedly and determinedly fought back . . .

A QUESTION OF NEIGHBORLINESS

By DAVID ELY

A CHILL SPRING STORM BURST ACROSS the meadow and shook the heavy-headed trees beyond. It blew in with the dusk, and the first raindrops seemed black, like bits of night torn out of the sky.

The young man limped toward the Hall. Its upper story was tightly shuttered, but some of the ground-floor rooms were lighted, and one window was touched with the soft irregular coloration that suggested a warm fire within. There was a cascade of thunder. The sky split, wild and bright. In the flash, the young man noticed a figure standing behind one of the unlighted windows; but it vanished as the lightning died.

Anxious to accomplish his mission, the young man hurried ahead, reached the massive door, and knocked. Almost at once the inside bolt was drawn and the door swung open.

"Come in, Mr. Smythe." The Colonel's voice was hearty and the handshake that accompanied it was firm. "Nasty turn of weather, eh? Ah, you've caught a bit of rain, I see. Come, I've got a fire. You'll soon warm up. And we'll put that coat of yours on a chair nearby to dry."

The young man readily removed his coat and stood before the fire. The paneled room, he judged, had once accurately reflected the solid prosperity of a successful landowner, but that must have been many years ago, long before the Colonel's time, for the rugs were frayed, the upholstery well-worn, and the tables dull from lack of polish.

"You'll have a drink, Mr. Smythe? . . . Of course!" the Colonel declared. He kept his bottles handy on a table near the hearth, and as he poked among them for the particular one he sought, the fire made the shadows of his fingers do a clumsy dance on the opposite wall.

"Here we are!" He grunted with satisfaction as he plucked the bottle up. "Well, sir, if you'll accept that chair, we'll draw up snug-like, see, and get to business." He puffed as he eased himself into his own chair

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and then cleared his throat noisily. "But first," he said, with a wink, "we'll have a toast. To neighborliness, eh?"

"Gladly," said Smythe.

"Capital!" the Colonel responded. He tilted his upraised glass and drank with gusto. "Um!" He smacked his lips, then gave his visitor a thoughtful look. "Sounds as though you had a bit of a cold, sir. Your voice is thick, I mean."

"I'm afraid so."

"Ah, well. This is the medicine for it, eh? You can't go wrong with a couple of doses of this prescription!" The Colonel chuckled and drank again. He was elderly, but as sturdy as a draft-horse, and his fleshy face was stained by years of weathering. He was an avid hunter, it seemed, for guns and rifles were hung on the walls or leaned in corners, each weapon glistening with fresh oil.

"Now," the Colonel barked cheerfully, as if he were convening a regimental officers' meeting. "You phoned me, sir, about my cows?"

"Yes. I'm afraid they found a gap in your fence, and wandered into my meadow—"

"Ah, so you informed me, Mr. Smythe. Well, the problem seems a simple one, eh? Come morning, I'll trot down to have a look at that fence and then get it patched up, that's all."

"I'd be much obliged, sir."

"No problem at all, Mr. Smythe. Never a problem between neighbors if there's fair dealing and honesty, is my opinion." The Colonel nodded in self-agreement and the firelight winked on his bald dome. "It's an honest county, this," he added, "though I've known it but a few short years. And yet, I'm not such a newcomer as yourself, sir, since this is your first season, eh? Strange about those cows, though," the Colonel rambled on. "Old Towsley, he's my dairyman—my whole staff, to tell the truth—he mumbled something about the beasts, come to think of it. Said of the eight, he counted but seven. In short, one missing."

"Oh, I say, really?" Mr. Smythe seemed taken aback. "I was almost positive I'd sent the lot back through—"

"Undoubtedly you did, sir, undoubtedly you did! Old Towsley's half blind and can't handle numbers besides. You could have driven a dozen of your own to my barn and the old chap wouldn't have noticed!"

"But, seriously, sir, I shall certainly have a talk with my men first thing tomorrow—"

"Think no more about it, Mr. Smythe!" The Colonel chuckled heartily. "I mentioned it simply to illustrate old Towsley's muddled ways. No indeed, sir, it isn't a question of one cow more or less, but of neighborliness, as I have said." He paused; then, with an embarrassed glance at Smythe, he added, "Excuse my thoughtlessness for refer-

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ring to Towsley's eye troubles. I meant no personal allusion to yourself—"

"Not at all, Colonel," Smythe said hastily. He removed his dark glasses, gave them a quick polish on his sleeve, and replaced them. "I've had a sensitivity to light, ever since childhood."

The Colonel made a clucking sound. "Pity!" He rose to replenish their drinks. "Neighborliness, Mr. Smythe, that's the drill in these parts, and I can honestly say I'm delighted to have such a considerate young man as yourself next door to me. Your glass, sir. Ah!" He sat down again. "I treasure such a relationship all the more, you see, because I had an unusually nasty experience in the opposite way five years back, when I was living up north. A rotten show it was, all the way through!" He leaned toward Smythe confidentially. "Had a chap adjoining me who was one of these odd quirky types—paranoia."

"Really!" remarked Smythe.

"Worst of it was," the Colonel went on, scowling at the recollection, "that nobody in the village had the decency to warn me. No, not them! They'd let the trusting old fool march in and buy his bit of land to settle down to a modest country existence—and not a word from them, not one! I had to find out for myself. 'Twas like living on a powder keg!"

"Good heavens," said Smythe. "What happened, sir?"

The Colonel took a healthy swallow from his glass. "Ah, it began quietly enough. That's the way with those chaps. To look at 'em, you'd never suspect a thing. Fellow rapped at my door one day, polite as pie. He told me in a roundabout way that one of my dogs had slipped over and killed a fowl of his. Oh, he was full of apologies. Could hardly bear to disturb me about it—that kind of thing. But I caught a glint in his eye, and I said to myself, 'Oho! Something's up here!' But naturally, I returned his politeness with my own."

"Of course," said Smythe.

"For the sake of appearances," the Colonel continued, "I went over with him to investigate, but I knew straightaway there was something odd, because neither of my pups had a taste for fowl. Good dogs both, they were. I suggested the presence of a fox, but the fellow claimed that one of his men had seen the culprit fleeing, and could swear it was a dog, and a collared dog at that. So what could I do but defend my own, eh? I denied it was possible. A dog, perhaps, but mine? Nonsense!"

"Did your neighbor become—er—violent?"

"Ah, not him!" the Colonel declared grimly. "That's not their way, you see, sir. They're clever, these creatures. Oh, he had a disarming way about him. A young chap, several years your junior, I would judge, Mr. Smythe; a bit

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slenderer, too, and with a rather high-pitched voice. When I spoke my little piece, he simply bowed his head a bit, as if he were accepting a challenge almost, and again I was struck by the look in his eye." The Colonel shrugged and shook his head. "I've been through some sticky places in my lifetime, I can tell you, but I'd never before seen a slyer, more ingratiating devil than that chap up north!"

"What did he do, Colonel?"

"Mr. Smythe, that was the very question that troubled me. Rather, I wondered what *would* he do? Not that I thought he was a loony then, but I can assure you I was a bit uneasy." The Colonel pursed his lips reflectively. "First, I decided to find out more about the man. I went to the village and made inquiries. I spoke to the banker and to some of the tradespeople. Right off, I could tell that this neighbor of mine had them scared speechless, for they claimed to have heard nothing bad about him, and on the contrary vowed that he was an altogether pleasant person. Not only that, sir, but I got the distinct impression that these poor folk would side with him in any dispute—out of sheer terror, you see. Why, in a week's time, they turned positively hostile toward me!"

Smythe nodded in response, and thoughtfully stroked his close-cut brown beard. "And then, Colonel?"

"Then the game broke out into the open," said the Colonel. "A day or two later, the fellow appeared again at my door, still pretending civility, you understand. He told me he'd lost a second bird the night before. I looked him in the eye. 'What's that to me, if I may ask?' I said, as any honest man would, and he dropped his gaze then—couldn't brazen it out, you see—and mumbled some kind of apology and off he went. But it gave me the shivers to see the way he slunk along, casting his eye left and right, for it put me in mind of the way a hunter will study the terrain where he intends to ambush his prey."

The Colonel paused to blow his nose. His listener remained silent, staring down into his glass.

"'Twas then," the Colonel went on, "that I smelled danger. I thought at first the rascal might try to poison my beasts—and then it occurred to me that he would hardly be satisfied with that. No, once these chaps get a grudge started, there's no easy ending, that I knew. Well, sir, I made a second foray into town, and I was a determined man by then. I cornered the banker and this time I held on. I wouldn't be shaken off, sir! For hours I worried at him, presenting the plain unvarnished facts, you see, and finally he had to admit, sir, that I was right. He seemed shocked and amazed, Mr. Smythe, and not a little frightened."

"You convinced him you were dealing with a madman?"

"Ah, not convinced, Mr. Smythe.

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He had known it all along, of course. No, I merely forced him to concede the truth, although he still pretended that this was the first hint of trouble that had come to him. Bankers are crafty that way, sir!" The Colonel set down his glass and fumbled in his pocket for a pipe. "He told me something about my neighbor's background. It seems that the young fellow was an orphan, of indifferent stock, who had got some kind of education and scraped up enough money to come to that county and buy his piece of land. Ah, in another type, such a story would be admirable, Mr. Smythe, but with this fellow, his struggle to succeed had merely puffed up his wild suspicions of the world until he had gone clear over the edge! The banker confided in me further. The young man, he said, had over-extended himself somewhat and was even then applying for a loan to see him through. Without it, he might be in deep trouble with his creditors.

"The opening was too obvious not to be seized. I said to him, 'Surely, you're not going to approve the loan?' And he replied, 'On the contrary, Colonel, I believe we will approve it.' The blindness of some folk! I argued with him, as you may imagine, saying that here was a heaven-sent opportunity to get rid of this creature. 'Deny the loan, sir, and you'll topple him,' I cried. He was uncertain at first—and I could hardly blame him, for a banker is by nature a timid animal—but after I had been at him for another hour or two, he agreed that the time had come for firmness. Yes, Mr. Smythe, I managed to stiffen his backbone. He promised he would turn down the application."

"Admirable," muttered Smythe.

"But there was much else to do," the Colonel continued, stuffing his pipe with tobacco. He brought it to his lips and struck a match, glancing sharply over the flame at the face of his guest. "I had to make certain of it. So in the next few days I visited each of the important tradesmen in turn, those who had extended credit to my neighbor. I didn't waste time in trying to overcome their terror of the lunatic. No, with them I pursued a subtler course. After gaining their confidence, sir, I let it slip, as if by accident, that the chap's attempt to get a loan from the bank was being turned down."

"A clever stratagem," said Smythe.

The Colonel inclined his head in acknowledgment. "The effect was like one of these chain reactions, sir. First one creditor called for payment of his bill, then another, then a third and fourth, and sure enough, within a few days that young devil was beating a path to the bank, hoping to speed up his loan. I happened to be in town that day myself. As a matter of fact, I had just visited the banker, for I anticipated what would happen. I wanted to put some more iron in his nerve, you

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see, so he wouldn't back down at the last minute. I drew myself up, sir, to full height, and I told that banker in no uncertain terms, sir, that if he turned tail and approved the loan, I could not be held responsible for the consequences."

"And he followed your—ah—advice?"

"He did indeed, Mr. Smythe! I was standing near the bank when the young chap came out. Oh, you could tell he had suffered a blow. He thought he had the village under his thumb, like some feudal tyrant, you see, and then all of a sudden—" The Colonel brought his hands sharply together and laughed shortly. "He was ruined, sir! He staggered toward me, pale and trembling. He gave me one glance —ah, the hatred in it, Mr. Smythe! —'twas like the mask of a demon, sir! But like a coward, he said nothing, and passed on by. The next day his land went on the market!"

"You had finished him, then," remarked Smythe.

"Not quite! Ah, but there was another factor I almost forgot. It seems that my intervention had prevented a great tragedy, sir. The young schemer was engaged to marry the daughter of one of the other landowners, a lovely girl she was, and naturally, when his bankruptcy came to public notice, the engagement was canceled—"

"Naturally."

"—and the girl herself, saved from a life of horrors, was dispatched by her family to France, to avoid the villain's revenge. These chaps will stop at nothing, Mr. Smythe! But I should tell you of that look he gave me there in the street outside the bank. As plain as day, sir, that look spoke an unutterable passion for vengeance, as if that young devil had screamed aloud his intention of murdering me, of hunting me down, sir, no matter what the cost, no matter how long it might take—"

"Ah," remarked Smythe, "but he appears to have been unsuccessful, thus far."

The Colonel chuckled. "True enough, sir, true enough! I was too quick for him, I think."

"You sold your own property and moved down here, I would gather."

"Correct, sir."

"To remove yourself from the possibility of being shot down by this—this madman," said Smythe. He reached over to feel his coat. It was quite dry now, except, it seemed, for the area around the shoulders.

The Colonel watched his movements. "Well, sir, not precisely for that reason," he said slowly.

"Don't mistake my meaning, Colonel," said Smythe quickly. "I don't imply that you had any personal fear—"

"Understood, sir!" boomed the Colonel. "No, let me tell you. It was a rather unpleasant incident, and at its conclusion I chose to move away, for there was some hard feel-

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ing among ignorant persons up there.

"Well, sir, the morning after the scene at the bank, I was out walking along the edge of my property, when I thought I heard a noise nearby. It seemed to come from the direction of the lunatic's fields, so I slipped across the fence to investigate.

"Over a rise, I saw him. He was on his knees in the meadow, sobbing. A fit had taken him, Mr. Smythe. I could tell that he was nerving himself to some desperate deed, and I saw with alarm a bulge in his coat pocket which I took to be a pistol, but which actually was a knife. One of these little fold-up affairs, sir, but capable of carving a man to ribbons!"

Smythe reached again toward his coat. "How frightful, Colonel. And did he attack you?"

"He would have, sir, he most certainly would have!" The Colonel puffed heavily on his pipe, and the smoke obscured his face. "But again, I was too quick for the chap. I pulled out my revolver—and fired!"

"You disabled him, sir?"

The Colonel coughed from the smoke and turned his head aside. "Not exactly, Mr. Smythe." He paused and coughed again. "No, I killed him, sir. Killed him on the spot. There was some nastiness about it later, but the jury at length agreed it was clearly self-defense on my part. It was after that, Mr. Smythe, that I moved here . . ."

The Colonel's voice faded and the echoes of his last words whispered along the walls. The dying fire glowed fitfully with little resentful spikes of reddish flame. The room hardened in silence.

The Colonel turned his head toward Smythe. His features seemed fleshier than before and his eyes were drawn into a squint.

When he spoke, his voice was thick, and it had a querulous tone. "But about our business, sir. About that so-called gap in my fence. Strange, most strange. I had not noticed it before you moved in, sir. Nor had my man Towsley, sir, and he's got a keen pair of eyes, Towsley has . . . What—leaving so soon, Mr. Smythe? Come now, sir, is that quite neighborly? And before your coat is dry . . . ?"

★ ★ ★

NEXT MONTH . . .

***New* short stories by**

PAT McGERR
JULIAN SYMONS
HELEN McCLOY

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MARK VAN DOREN**
TITLE:	***The Luminous Face***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	The Inspector
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Another "purely luminous" story by the famous American poet . . . and we wonder: who else could have written this particular story in this particular way?*

EVEN THE INSPECTOR WAS MOVED. The dead boy's face was beautiful despite its wound: a great bruise that disfigured the left cheek and extended back into the dark hair which many examining fingers had tangled till it was wild. But the face itself had never been wild. It still wore an expression which the Inspector kept turning about to consider.

Again and again he went over it; and then, as if there were nothing in it after all, he shrugged and gave the customary order: "Take care of this till we get identification. Plenty of pictures, too, in case—but he must have lived in the neighborhood; somebody will claim him."

Nobody did; and when the burial notice was brought to the Inspector he said a strange thing.

"Too bad. He almost told me who did it. I kept thinking I could find out from his face what happened. But of course I couldn't, there's nothing in that. It might have been accidental anyway—slipped or fell, or a truck chain swung and slugged him; he could have been near the curb; we had a case like that last year. But I don't think so. Somebody did this. And damned if I see why. There couldn't have been any

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money on him, with those clothes. And it was a good face, if you get what I mean; it almost told me what I wanted to know."

None of the officers did get what he meant. Some of them hadn't gone with him to Dominick Street, and those who had were busy with other things: ringing doorbells in the block, interviewing bystanders, and consulting their list of local gangs. None of them looked for evidence in the pale features on which peace sat as if it were a bird with no intention of flying away. As if it were the boy's soul, determined not to leave his body yet. It was more, in fact, than either of those; it was a rapturous contentment with what the boy had seen, was seeing, when something or somebody killed him, and he dropped in the dark street to lie until a dog barked, a woman screamed, and a patrolman came running from the corner. The woman knew nothing, and neither did anybody else who was questioned.

It was a closed case until the day next spring when Clancy came in and said to the Inspector: "There's a man here, a painter, wants to see you about the Dominick Street boy —remember?—that we never identified. He's been looking at the photographs; says it was his son."

"I'll see him."

The man was half starved, and the Inspector made him sit down.

"A painter? Where do you work?"

The man was nervous; he would rather have stood. "At home, sir, in my studio."

"Don't call me sir. You're not a house painter."

"Oh, no."

"Clancy, did you take his name and address?"

"Certainly. Philip Strong, 231 East Third."

"That's nowhere near—Strong, why didn't we hear from you before?"

"I don't read the newspapers, I don't go out."

"But you missed your boy—you had one, didn't you?"

"I had *him*." He still held one of the photographs in his hand, that shook as he looked down.

"I can believe it. There's a resemblance." But the Inspector thought: the face I remember is only half there. "Your wife living?"

"No, sir, not since he was two years old."

"Don't call me sir. How old was he last October? What was his name?"

"Raphael."

"What?"

"Raphael. He was seventeen."

"Can you prove he was your son? I hope you can, frankly; I won't make it hard."

"Only"—he hesitated—"by my paintings. Most of them are of him; a hundred, nearly. If you would come and look—or send somebody—"

"I'll come." Clancy was aston-

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ished. "Call my car. Tell Jones I only want the car; I'll drive."

The studio was nothing but a north room over an empty store. The painter went in first, apologizing for the disorder; but it must have been years ago that he gave up caring how his habitation looked. In the two corners away from the window were two narrow beds, only one of which was made.

"Where he slept," said Strong, following the Inspector's glance.

The rest of the space was cluttered with broken chairs, a stove, a sink, some unwashed dishes, rags, brushes, dirt. But an easel stood in the best place, and on it, in a gilt frame, was a portrait which the Inspector went at once to examine. He stood close to it, then backed away; looked over at Strong; then grew absorbed again in the face before him. The open eyes—soft, beautiful, black—were what he studied most. He had never seen them open.

"That's him," he said, and when he saw tears in the father's eyes he did all he could to speak gently. He still had questions to put.

"You said there were others, nearly a hundred." The painter started toward a closet whose door would not shut on all it contained. "But this is enough, don't bother. Is it finished?"

"No, I keep working on it. Ever since he left I've been tormented by this memory of mine"—he rubbed his forehead—"it changes every hour of every day. But that is Raphael. Thank you for recognizing him."

"You say he left. When was that?"

"October sixth."

"The same day—"

"Yes, or the same night. He was on his way to the ferry; he was going west; I made him go." He stuck his hands together. "I made him go. But I expected to hear from him—cards and letters. When they didn't come I got a certain satisfaction from this"—pointing to the easel—"I tried to see him as he must be then, wherever he was, whatever he was doing."

The Inspector looked for the least untrustworthy chair and sat down in it, carefully.

"What do you mean, you made him go? If it's any of my business."

"He was too good."

"What?"

The painter, it appeared, hadn't expected to be understood. "You would have to know more about Raphael than you do. Or than I can tell you." Yet after a minute of looking out of the window, over the ramshackle roofs on which a cool clear sun was shining, he continued.

"Raphael didn't know about the world. I sent him off to find out what it was like in other places. Here in New York he didn't see what others see—what I do myself, what anybody does. He would pass a bar, would look in at the dingy lamps, the men there with glasses, the whole terrible, stupid scene, and

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the most wonderful expression would come over his face. I knew what it was, for sometimes he told me, though not very well; and never, mind you, proudly. He was thinking of the light inside those men; they sat in darkness, but their souls were bright within them—made so, of course, by rye and bourbon, and cold beer."

"We all see that," said the Inspector. "We call it being lit. Of course we don't say anything about the soul."

"Oh, but he did, and went on then to think about his own. It was still brighter. It was drunk too in a way, but not from drinking. He had his natural light, that I've tried to paint and always failed. It was really a light, I think. He was going to beautify the world with it—not by preaching, or blaming others because they were different from him, but simply by existing to the full extent of what he was: by walking the streets, or coming home here and sitting by the window, or getting into bed there and letting his eyes go round and round the ceiling—well, dozens of ways, but the point was that something burned like a diamond in him, and this was all he considered to be necessary. If it was true, it made a tremendous difference in the world. And he made sure it was true. He did nothing but think how things would be if they were purified by fire: not real fire, but the kind he carried around with him inside of his dark head. He walked in the world like a fine day. He loved it, and he wanted it to love him. I tell you, it was a kind of intoxication, the purest and sweetest kind. But now—maybe I've made him sound insane. A pyromaniac or something."

The Inspector, ignoring his gaze, said nothing.

"That would be a horrible mistake. Raphael was serene. Except, to be sure, during the past year, when he grew restless and wouldn't tell me why. Then one day in June he did. He said he had found out something by himself: something I never have, or anybody else I know. I can't imagine how one could, but Raphael did. It came to him as clear as glass, or ice. He suddenly understood what it means to say that it makes all the difference in the world what each of us does. Not merely is, but does. Most of us couldn't bear to believe that; we'd be watching every move we made, every breath and every thought, and we'd be crushed at last by the responsibility. And so he was, in a way; but with him there was no old guilt, no habit of being disgusted with himself, to make the burden intolerable.

"Raphael knew how to be pleased with his own soul; it contented him, it soothed him, it was his best and most beautiful friend. This was why he didn't have to think about it any more than he did. It left him free, as our lungs do, when the weather is sweet, to enjoy nothing but that

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sweetness. Don't misunderstand me, Inspector. Raphael loved himself, and therefore he could love the world. But now he had this vision of the universe as a great curved mirror in which each act, each utterance, each idea is magnified forever; and worse than that—or it would have been worse for you and me—the mirror was a kind of mind, a kind of heart; it was indeed all mind, all heart, and both at once; it was a person, and it judged us; it was gratified, was grieved, according as we played our parts below; and it concealed in its depths the consequences of our lives—our whole lives, and each minute of them too.

"Even for Raphael this was hard, because there was a next step to take, and nothing showed him how. He had no sense of what he ought to do, of what the great person up there would be most pleased by if he did it. He was on the stage, and ready to act, but still there were no lines for him to speak. What should he do? What should he not do? To do nothing might be the worst thing; yet there he was, helpless to go or come.

"It was then I began to talk about his leaving me a while. I couldn't answer his questions; but the big world west of the river, once he was moving through it, might teach him to forget them. Not that I thought them wrong—or mad, oh, no!—but I was at the end of my wits, and for all I knew he was just at the beginning of his; and if so, a change of some sort would be good. I was the mad one, Inspector. I made him go. Everything I had was in him, and I sent him off."

He felt his way to the window, found it, and turned about, the light behind him almost obliterating his thin figure.

"What will you do now?" The Inspector blinked. "I'm sorry for you, Strong. What will you do—go on painting that?" He inclined his head toward the easel.

Strong threw up his hands, then let them fall of their own weight. "I don't know. Until today, when I thought of asking the police—the idea came to me before, but I fought it off—until I saw your photographs I wouldn't admit there was anything *to* do. He would come back, I said; over and over I said it; then suddenly, this morning, I had doubts; and as soon as doubts, fears. I just don't know, Inspector."

"Can you live? I mean, do you ever sell any of those?" He motioned toward the closet door.

"Oh, none of *those*." Strong was alarmed. "Occasionally another kind, that I can do to order. Also, my wife left me a little money—just a little. Yes, I can keep alive."

"Did you notice anything in particular about the photographs? I had them taken because the boy's face—well, it struck me. It seemed to be about to"—he searched for words, found none that wouldn't embarrass him, and gave up.

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"About to—please, Inspector, what?"

"Well then, *say* something. It was what you would call a speaking face. Even with the eyes closed I thought if I waited long enough it would tell me—"

"What? What sort of thing?"

"Who killed him. Or what killed him. But then he couldn't have known it was going to happen."

"No, no! Of course not!" A singular agitation seized the man. "For one thing, he wouldn't have believed it possible that any object, any person—"

"You think it was a person?"

Strong stared at him. His face worked strangely.

"You're not trying to tell me, are you, that *you* did it?" the Inspector said softly.

In the deep silence of the room the gasp that Strong made seemed to keep on echoing and coming back. It was a dreadful sound, and the Inspector spoke now in a deliberate voice, as if he measured every word against that echo.

"Have you been telling me all the time you couldn't take him as he was? You couldn't live with anyone like that? You couldn't stand him being—perfect? Pity, perhaps? For him, more than you? I don't mean, Strong, I don't necessarily mean anything ugly, at least in the first stages. Is that what you've been—"

It was no noise that stopped him, but rather the absence of any noise at all, inside the room or out of it, over the roofs or anywhere, while the boy's father wept. Tears formed in his eyes and fell; and others formed, and slowly fell; and he wiped none of them away as he watched, incredulous, the face that had accused him.

The Inspector, watching him in return, saw nothing but tears, and behind them the wide-open eyes of one who had supposed he was his friend.

He was.

"I had to do that, Strong." The Inspector got up suddenly. "It was one angle, and I had to—here! sit down!" For Strong was staggering away from the window. The Inspector lowered him into the chair, and now his own back was toward the light. "One possibility, on paper at least, was that you went with him as far as Dominick Street and then —but stay where you are, I won't give you any more, sit still, Strong, sit still. The business you can't imagine—well, I can't either. It could have been more than one, you understand. A mob of them—wild boys—and they wouldn't have taken the trouble to look before they—"

"Oh!" It was a pure groan, not meant for ears to hear.

"Now then, there won't be any more." The Inspector turned about. "I hate to leave you, Strong, but I'll be back—tomorrow, maybe. You stay here. I'll come again and see how you're doing."

"Inspector!" He wasn't trying to get up. "I wasn't there, of course I

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wasn't, but I know how he looked when—I know what you saw in his eyes, even if they were closed. I saw it in the photographs; I see it here in that picture; I see it everywhere, and always will. Raphael was happy when he died. It was all clear to him. The mirror, I mean, and the great mind. Do you know what I think, Inspector? He had just got the parts of it in place—he knew for the first time what to do, what not to do—he may even have turned around and started home to let me know I mustn't worry any more."

"Yes, yes, that may have been it." The Inspector, hat on head, stood soberly at the door. "I wouldn't be surprised, Strong, if that was the way it was. But now don't think about it any oftener than you have to. I'll be here tomorrow, early in the afternoon. You wait. I'll come."

"Where would I go?"

The heavy steps continued down the stairs.

Back at his desk the Inspector said: "Clancy, let me see that list of Dominick Street gangs. All of them, and those nearby, as far uptown as Houston. I want every name we've got there on those lists. I want each one checked over, and each kid brought in here by the end of this month."

"The kids themselves. One at a time?"

"Not necessarily; two or three together wouldn't hurt. But every last damned one—you get me?"

"What'll we do then? Chloroform 'em?"

"Maybe, but before they go under I've got something I want to beat into their heads so it will stay there."

"Listen, Inspector. You won't find out a thing about that boy, if he's the one—"

"He is. We're going to have his father on our hands too; or the city will. But first, bring in the kids, the muggers—young or old, I want them all. This is serious. Understand?"

"No, Inspector."

"Thought you wouldn't. But it's nothing off my nose. Simply an order. Run on now and get it out."

"Yes, Inspector."

He sat there a long time wondering how he would put into words the thing he wanted them never to forget. The thing they did to someone they hadn't looked at twice. Or even once, in that dark block. There could be another light at the far end—there would be, he decided—but it wouldn't take the place of this one that could never burn again.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARVIN ROSSMAN**

TITLE: ***What Would You Do?***

TYPE: ?

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Meet Homer's nephew-by-marriage—easily one of the most contemptible villains ever to darken EQMM's editorial door . . .*

THE FELLOW STANDING NEXT TO me at the bar jogged my elbow, making me spill half the bourbon which I like to take straight, with no chaser.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asked cheerfully.

It is not that I don't drink with strangers. But I like to be sure it isn't a "foot in the door" technique to sell me something or con me out of something. I looked him over.

A heavy-set, middle-aged guy—working man, to judge by his hands, truck driver maybe. He clamped an unlit cigar in his mouth, as if he could afford only one a day. Wearing his best clothes, I guessed, but not at ease in a too-new suit.

"What's the occasion?" I asked cautiously.

"I'm rich," he said, tickled at the thought. "I just got my hands on ten thousand bucks."

"Rich uncle died?" I inquired politely. And pointing to the bartender I added, "I'm drinking the best bourbon, straight."

He laughed as though I had made a very witty remark.

"Something like that. Only it ain't happened just yet. When it does, I'll buy drinks for the house." To the bartender he added, "I'll drink the same as this gentleman. Only add ice and some ginger ale to mine."

"Down the hatch," I encouraged him. It wasn't really necessary—he was bubbling to talk.

"Who would've thought my wife's no-good Uncle Homer was worth ten grand?" he started.

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Leaving out the drinks he bought and my prodding remarks, here is the story he told me . . .

Uncle Homer is what I call a "mustache." Not one of these beatnik kinds. Homer's got one of these old-fashioned bushy ones that bachelor uncles used to sport when I was a kid. He ain't no older'n me but he's all gray and tired-looking, and worst of all he's what I call a philosopher.

He's one of these guys who is always sighing and saying gentle things. It's a good thing he's not a father. He don't know how to handle kids. He's always spoiling 'em. Of course the kids love him. They know when Uncle Homer comes to the house his pockets are stuffed with candy. He's not much for bringing toys but he always seems to have a stack of shiny nickels and dimes on him.

A million times I tell him, "Homer, will you let the kids alone! A smack in the head is what they appreciate. If you want a kid to behave, just sock him one. But the way you treat them, I can't keep 'em in line for a week after you been here."

"A little affection won't hurt 'em any," he answers. "Kids need love and candy more than they need discipline."

See what I mean about his being a philosopher? Those kind of guys never amount to much. Homer's been a construction laborer all his life and don't earn near the money I do operating a loader.

Just the same, Naomi, that's my wife's name, she sometimes sticks up for Homer. Says he's right and that I'm too rough on the kids—all that kind of guff. Sometimes I'm ready to smack her, too, and once or twice I do. The house stays awful quiet for a while after that.

Anyway, I finally throw Uncle Homer out for good and tell him not to come around any more. It happens this way. I'm chewing out Junior, that's my oldest, 'cause he hasn't mowed the whole lawn and I tell him no more allowance for a month, when "mustache" Homer butts in.

"I'm sure I can help out, Junior, so you won't be altogether broke," he says.

That does it. A real buttinski.

"You shut your mouth," I yell at Homer. "And why don't you get the hell out of here! I don't need no help from you in raising my own brats."

Homer doesn't answer. That's the kind of guy he is—no guts. His mustache just droops and he shrugs his shoulders and then just walks away like that—you know, with his head pulled down between his shoulders like a turtle and a sad look on his pan.

Well, we don't hear no more from Homer for a few months, and boy, I tell you I'm grateful. No truck about the children needing candy and affection, and Naomi

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never blats even once about her having rights. Things're back to normal and I am living in a peaceful household once again.

Then just a few days ago we get this phone call. Naomi answers. I can tell right away it's bad news. And I can tell it's about Uncle Homer, the way she keeps repeating his name.

"Aw, let him drop dead," I tell her.

"But he's awful sick," she insists. "Some friends of his went to see him to go have a few beers and they found Homer laying on the floor with blood coming out of his mouth. We better go over and see him. We're the only family he's got."

And she starts in to cry. Now that gets me—right here. I don't mind if Naomi cries 'cause I hit her. That's only natural. But when she starts to cry for no good reason at all, when there's no bruises nor nothin', then I know I am in for trouble. So I give in. After all, as they say, blood is thicker than booze.

So we run over to Homer's place which is right nearby. And there's old Homer. What a mess! Sure enough, blood's coming from his mouth. I figure he's a goner sure. A stroke is what it is—I find that out later on.

I take charge immediately. I call an ambulance and go along personally. If there is anything I like it is real excitement. So we get Homer to the hospital and the first thing this desk woman does is start asking me questions.

Homer's name, address, occupation, age—all that stuff. Then comes the real part. "Who will be financially responsible?"

"We will," says Naomi real fast. I could clout her one right then and there.

"Now wait a minute," I snap. "Here is this man practically dying and all you people can think about is money. You call this a Mercy Hospital?"

You know this old bag at the desk never even blinks. If there is anything I hate it's this hypocritical kind of politeness where you can't get them mad no matter *what* you say.

She says, "Your uncle is being taken care of. And this will be done even if he is indigent. However, I should like to make some suggestions which may be helpful."

"What kind of suggestions?"

"Does he have a medical plan?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Is he a member of a union? Sometimes unions have medical benefits and even life insurance policies in the event the patient expires."

Sure, I remember now that Homer is a member of the Laborers' Local and that life insurance bit kind of catches my attention. So I tell the old gal I will check on it. Still she gets in the last threatening word.

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"I certainly hope the poor man has medical coverage. But if he hasn't we will send the bill to you."

Naomi actually thanks the old bat like she's doing us a favor. That's a woman for you. No sense worth a damn.

Next day I go up to Homer's union headquarters. The little girl they have there for a receptionist looks like she's going to bust out crying when I tell her about Homer. She knows him all right. Very sympathetic doll, she is.

"Yes, he is covered in our welfare plan," she says. She gives me the papers to fill out. "All we will need is a copy of the hospital bill and a statement from the attending doctor. Just wait till he is out of the hospital and we will take care of the bill."

"What if he dies?" I ask. I want to be sure from every possible angle before I get out of there.

The little lady sucks in her breath like I've said something shocking. "Oh, we would still be responsible for the bill."

"How about insurance? Does he have any life insurance?"

She looks it up. "Yes. He has ten thousand dollars."

Ten thousand bucks! I never figure Homer has more than a thousand at the most—enough for a pine box and a little extra for his relatives who take good care of him at the end. I have to swallow and sort of sneak up on the next question.

"Who is the beneficiary, Miss?"

"Sorry. We do not release information like that," she answers automatically.

I open my mouth to give her an argument. They can't keep information like that from a man's closest relative and the one who comes to his aid when he's dying. But then I think, the hell with it. No sense appearing greedy. Besides, I have an idea of how I can find out.

I go home and put it straight to Naomi.

"You know anything about Uncle Homer's insurance?"

Naomi doesn't answer. I say, "Listen, Naomi. We been married a long time. You can't keep nothin' from me. Sooner or later I'm going to find out. And if you are hiding anything from me and I do find out, I'll beat the living daylights out of you."

One thing about Naomi. Sometimes you can reason with her. She hardly makes no fuss at all and shows me the policy right off. There it is—plain as the nose on your face—ten thousand smackers. And Naomi is the sole beneficiary.

Well, that's good enough for me. Of course Homer should of named me beneficiary for half of it but what the hell. What's hers is mine anyway. I kiss her. I got to admit Naomi is a real fine-looking woman at times, even if she is my wife.

And that's it. When Homer goes I get ten thousand all in one lump. Yip-pee!

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He was quite drunk when he came to the end of the story, a cheerful friendly kind of drunk. He threw an arm that was as heavy as a side of beef over my shoulder. At that moment he loved everyone.

"What if Homer doesn't die?" I suggested. "What if he lives?"

"Homer?" He looked at me incredulously. "The mustache? He won't last. No guts to fight a thing like this." Then he slapped his thigh and laughed himself helpless, as though I was the greatest comic in the world.

It was two months before I saw Homer's nephew again. Same bar, same seat, same position. Only he wasn't buying drinks this time. He was hunched over a beer, nursing it, and looking glum.

"What happened to Uncle Homer?"

He looked at me in surprise, then squinted to study my face. His expression changed to what might have been a sneer.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I asked, hoping to encourage him to talk.

"Yeah, what was that stuff you drink? Bourbon, I'll have some of that."

"You don't look happy. Did Homer disappoint you?"

"Homer," he said, and he spat on the floor to get the taste of that unpleasant name off his tongue. "Homer is a spiteful two-legged rat."

"You mean, he didn't die?"

"Nah. Just for spite. He hung on and hung on till the hospital bill run up to six hundred and fifty-eight dollars and twenty-four cents. And then the damned hospital had the nerve to charge me five bucks more for the extra copy of the bill."

"But at least the union reimbursed you for all the medical expenses?" I suggested.

"Reimbursed? That no-good crummy outfit! When I come back they checked the records again and they find that Homer ain't worked in over three months on account he wasn't feeling well. He let himself fall behind in his dues and he ain't in good standing any more, the bum. So they tell me he ain't covered and I can't collect.

"'What kind of an outfit you running here,' I tell the girl. 'A man is flat on his back, sick, maybe dying, and you just drop him after he's been paying his dues all these years.'

"So then she says she ain't running the outfit, she's just a secretary.

"'Let me see the boss,' I insist.

"'The boss is busy,' she says.

"'You bet, he's busy,' I holler. 'But he ain't too busy to talk with me. I know my rights.'

"'So then the girl panics and runs out a door in the back. 'I'll stay right here,' I yell out good and loud. Sure enough, in a little while a young guy comes out. He looks more like a college type than a union boss to me.

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"'Can I help you,' he wants to know, just like a floorwalker in a department store.

"'You can if you're the boss,' I says. 'My uncle Homer is a dues-paying member of this union. He's been in the hospital and he's entitled to sick benefits. I'm a union man myself,' I explain, 'and I know all about brotherhood. One for all and united we stand; together we fall.'

"He has to admit I have a point there. A real smooth talker, that young guy. He offers me a cigar and begins to explain their rules.

"'I don't care a rap about your rules,' I say. 'I just want to protect Homer's rights.' I didn't care about myself, I tell him, but I can't bear to see a man kicked when he is down.

"So then this union guy, Larkin his name is, comes down to cases. He shows me the rules and the constitution and what all and sure enough they got it sowed up that when a man don't pay for a while all his benefits stop.

"'You mean you're gonna knock off Homer's life insurance, too,' I say, raising my voice. If there's anything I hate, it's kicking a man when he's down, I tell him.

"'Oh, no,' says this Larkin. 'There is one ray of hope,' he says. 'We have,' he explains, 'a premium waiver clause and if it can be shown that he didn't pay because he was too sick to work, his insurance will still be valid.'

"I get as mad as a hornet at that till he explains that 'valid' means the ten grand insurance is still good. So I apologize and thank him in Homer's behalf because at least they have the common decency not to take away a sick man's insurance. And there it stands," Homer's nephew concluded.

"So you are still going to collect," I said, somewhat puzzled now by his glumness.

"Argh! Homer ain't gonna die. I think it is just spite. After all, what has a guy like that got to live for? It ain't as if he had a family or anything. He's practically crippled. He can't never work again. The Social Security is paying him something. But it ain't hardly enough to cover his board. He gives Naomi the whole check but after we buy groceries we hardly have ten bucks a month left out of it for ourselves, honest. Not even a measly ten bucks."

"You never can tell," I comforted him. "A guy in Homer's condition—he could keel over one of these days just like that." He didn't notice any irony in my voice.

"No such luck!" he answered. "Why, just last week he got on his crutches and left the house. Was gone for two hours. Said he went for a ride on the bus, just for some fresh air."

"Don't let a thing like that bother you," I assured him. "A guy like Homer—the mustache, no guts, you know. Take the crutches away from him. With a little imagination

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you could change his diet. Give him lots of booze—very bad for a guy who's had a stroke. And in no time old Homer will be off your hands."

He never even detected the sarcasm in my words. In fact, he brightened a bit and gave me a conspiratorial wink that made me feel as though an ice cube had been dropped down the back of my collar. He even refused another drink and left the bar smiling for the first time since I'd seen him that evening.

Homer's nephew-by-marriage was seated at the bar again. I recognized his broad, hunched shoulders from the back.

"How's Homer?" I asked politely.

"He's dead." He scowled at me.

I stopped the bourbon halfway to my lips.

"You already bought drinks for the house?" I inquired.

"With what?" he growled.

"With part of the ten grand," I said pointedly.

His face turned the color of a B-girl's lips under a green light. And the stream of words he used before he came to the point were about the same color.

"—that crumb blankety-blank mustache Homer. You know what he done? That day I told you about when he took a ride on the bus. I found out yesterday he went down to the union and changed the beneficiary of his life insurance."

"Who got the money?"

"My five kids."

I still didn't understand his gloom. "That shouldn't be so bad. You're their legal guardian, aren't you?"

"Hell! He had it put in a trust fund. Each one of 'em to get two thousand dollars when he reaches thirty years of age. And my oldest is only fourteen now."

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. I had the same kind of feeling I had on the day I heard the war was over. Homer's nephew-by-marriage thought I had gone nuts. For a minute he looked as though he was going to punch me. But he didn't. He left the last bourbon untouched and walked out.

See what I mean? It's the damnedest story I've ever heard—but I can't do a thing about it. I could go to the police, but—well, what could I tell them? In the first place, I don't even know the man's name. In the second place, I think the fellow is being punished plenty. And in the third place, I'm not even sure a crime was committed.

What would you do if you were in my place?

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Another change of pace, this time with 'tec tongue in cheek, by a bright and versatile new writer . . . how the ABT (Amalgamated Burglary Trades) took over the Chicago underworld, and the Runyonesque results thereof . . . As the Dopester says: specialization, research, democracy in action, progress, loyalty, and plenty of dough circulating—that's what made this country great!

THE CAPER OF THE CENTURY

by MARGARET AUSTIN

MITCH TOSSES THE NEWSPAPER onto the bed beside him and says, "Here's an ad for pickled pigs' feet—real cheap, too. Our cook's got no imagination and a one-page cookbook." He sits there rubbing his cauliflower ear the way he does when he is thinking. "Maybe we could use a union—think it'd do any good, Augie, if we went on strike?"

I am leaning against the window frame and studying the cloud pictures. One is a perfect .45 automatic; another is shaping up to a reasonable likeness of a safe, but none is looking like pickled pigs' feet. "Sure, lots of good—same as the strike against the ABT."

"The ABT?" Mitch is a muscle man who is pulled in from the Coast for a one-shot job, which fact I am forgetting when I talk to him the way I talk to the local boys.

"The ABT ties up Chicago for fair. That is real living—three-inch steaks, ten-carat rings, penthouse apartments—and no trouble from the cops." Mitch looks interested, hence I check my watch for the hour. "It is a long story, but I guess we got the time."

Scratching my right shoulder against the window frame, I try to recollect how it happens, for it is better to explain about the ABT from the beginning. . . .

It is strictly the Dopester's idea (I tell Mitch). No escaping that, the Dopester is a good idea man. We are sitting there in a Clark Street joint, downing a couple at the bar and lamenting how Digger gets himself picked up. Stupid-like, he forgets to case the place for a camera eye, so here he is pulling a good-sized heist job and making like "Candid Camera" at one and the same time.

Anyway, the Dopester says, "That's the trouble these days—too much for one guy to think about. Gone are the good old times when

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you jimmied the door, cracked the safe, and walked out before the neighbors yelled for the cops. Now you got to make a checklist and be ten guys all at once."

We ponder that a bit. 'Course, I cannot but agree with him. Then he snaps his fingers and lights up like someone is standing us a free round.

"What you got cooking, Dopester?" I ask, knowing the signs.

"That's the trouble with our trade—we are still individualists in a age of specialization! Look at the auto industry—they wouldn't of got no place if Henry Ford hadn't invented the production line and put one man in charge of each nut and bolt. That's what made this country great—one man doing one job—specialization."

"Well," I say doubtfully, "it sure makes H. Ford great, anyway."

"It made the working man of this country great, too," he insists. "Seven-hour day, time-and-a-half over time, two-car garage, own your own roost, happy babies—show me another country where the worker's got it so good." He's feeling so carried away he signals the bartender, hence I wait until the glasses are full before tossing the bomb.

"Seems to me it is the unions do that for the worker." Well, I have him there, but he comes back just like it is his own idea.

"Sure, specialization and the unions—couldn't have one without the other. And, like I say, that's the trouble with our trade—we're still working a 1800 guild shop in the twentieth century. Why does the Digger get picked up? And Jake, and Matt the Rat? Because they forget *one little detail,* that's why. Too much on their minds. No guy's a expert at everything. Now, here's what we're going to do." And he leans over and starts whispering, fast.

I have my doubts, but before you can say "Joliet," he's got Benny the Brain, who is formerly a nine-to-five man for a business management outfit, making time-motion studies. That Dopester, when he has an idea, he does not waste any time going into operation. . . .

Mitch is rubbing his cauliflower ear thoughtfully. "The Dopester? A skinny little guy with a big bald head? Wears specs? Seems I met him in the tailor shop. I'm pretty sure I did."

"Sure, that's the Dopester. Always he liked good clothes. Do myself." I see a wrinkle in my gray pants, hence I smooth it out, because I am not fond of wrinkles in any shape or form. "Next suit I get will be *custom—this off-the-pipe* stuff is for the squares."

"You still haven't gotten to the ABT," Mitch reminds me, which is not necessary since he is the one who interrupts. But I am not seeking a mix-up with a muscle man, hence I continue like he does not interrupt. . . .

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The ABT—the Amalgamated Burglary Trades—that is what the Dopester calls it when he holds the first organization meeting. We confab on the guys to count in and settle on nine, which jibes nicely with the job breakdown in Benny the Brain's time-motion study. The Dopester lifts a silver-banded gavel at Carson's and a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order Revised* from Field's book department, and is all set when the boys show.

He calls the meeting to order, outlines the general purpose, and passes out copies of the time study; whereupon all the guys start yapping at once and the Dopester has to pound with the gavel like he is busting rock.

"This here is an organization meeting and we are going to conduct it as such." Glancing at *Robert's Rules,* he goes on, "The chair recognizes Prince John."

Prince John says, "I perceive that you and Augie have devoted an immense effort and great mental cerebration to this project. Do I deduce correctly that you have extended an invitation to this meeting to each of us gentlemen for some specific role in this endeavor?"

That is just like Prince John, biting fast and right down to the apple core.

"I am glad you ask that question," says the Dopester. "You are correct. As you see in Benny the Brain's time study, we cannot work as efficiently with gloves as we can without gloves. In fact, we waste enough time so maybe the cops come snooping—which is inefficiency.

"Now, for you, Prince, I have in mind organizing our Fingerprint Division. Your boys know everything about prints—where they stick and where they don't, and how to clean 'em off where they do. Rag, soap and water, cleaning fluid. It is a big responsibility, but I figure accepting responsibility is what made this country great, and you're just the mug can handle it."

Prince John sits there contemplating his manicure and looking pleased. We have figured him a natural for the job. He is the snappiest dude on the Near North, which is how he gets labeled "Prince," takes three showers a day, and is the only guy I know who wears spats and carries a cane. It hides a jimmy in the shaft, but it is still a cane.

"May I," he says finally, looking up from the manicure, "be permitted a small suggestion? It is readily apparent that we will exercise great caution to keep this organization privy and confidential. We shall not accomplish this if a member is apprehended carrying a membership card for the Fingerprint Eradicator Local of the Amalgamated Burglary Trades, for such items by their very nature lead to embarrassing questions. Shall we not then select an innocuous title for each local?"

"Hear ye! Hear ye!" someone

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calls, and the Prince bows and continues.

"My small suggestion, presented for due and deliberate consideration of the membership, would be to affix the title of Royal Affiliated Cleaners to the fingerprint local."

Well, the Dopester is always a man to appreciate a pun, so he jumps in to spare Prince John having to suggest it himself. "And like they have Elks and Moose and all that, we will call each local member a Prince."

Everyone claps and pounds his glass on the table, hence the Dopester pours another round and Prince John goes back to studying his manicure.

That is the way the whole meeting goes: the Associated Transport Drivers take charge of cars and getaway routes; the lookouts get organized as Hawks and enroll for rapid identification training like the Air Corps gives during the war; the Insurance Affiliates line up the job and figure the angles—alarm system, guard's routine, the take in the till—and on through all the job breakdowns. We close the meeting at dawn with everyone hepped-up and hoarse, and the Dopster rubbing his right biceps from overworking the gavel.

Artie the Engraver runs off some fancy membership cards, and fast as the organizers propose guys and vote on them—we have a no-blackball rule before voting on a future member, it is safer that way—why, the Dopester marches them to the University for aptitude tests. Then he apprentices them to a local and gets them practicing the routine until they are automatic as H. Ford putting a fender on a Model T.

That Dopester, he is an idea man and organizer in spades. Naturally, he is voted president of the ABT.

Soon the union is showing real progress and everyone is happy—all but the ones we call shop stewards. With everyone else so happy, no grievances are being filed, which leaves the stewards sitting around drawing half-pay most of the time. This is not improving their good humor. The Dopster does not like to see any member with a long face, hence he is getting an idea to solve the problem, and appoints the stewards to be a Research Committee. He figures if the crime labs are doing research all the time, the ABT owes it to the membership to go and do likewise.

"Without science and research we would be making our getaway in covered wagons," the Dopester tells the stewards. "Research—that's what made this country great."

Right off, the Research Committee suggests putting short-wave sets in the transport cars and giving transmitters to the inside guys. Then, instead of being a mote in the eye of some cop, the drivers can sail off for a beer until the job-complete call comes in. Real handy, too, if the wife wants a loaf of bread picked up on the way home.

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The next suggestion by the Research Committee is even better. The cops are hauling in half the membership after every job. Don't have nothing on them, of course—just fishing for a break—but it interferes with bowling and blackjack, hence we form a tenth local for alibi experts. They make a tape recording of a work crew playing stud poker; then, when the job is scheduled, they hole up in a hotel room and run the tape for three or four hours. If the cops pull in one of our boys, he is all set. Nine other mugs say they are kept awake by the arguing and the chips slapping down. Foolproof.

With this set-up, we keep the cops buffaloed. The crew moves in on a bank or currency exchange, pulls a smooth job, gets away, and the cops cannot finger a one. The boys are putting in a five-hour week and dragging home an average grand after union dues, pension fund, and various, sundry, and divers deductions. Everything is coming up rosebushes.

Before you can say "Joliet," the ABT treasury is so loaded we get to worrying that some independent is going to try crashing in, hence we vote to invest in a Union Hall. Across from Lincoln Park we put up a red and white marble job which is complete with machine shop, bowling alleys, swimming pool, gym, and carpets you can lose a billiard ball in.

Real democratic, you understand, the boys vote on everything. As the Dopester says, "Democracy in action—that's what made this country great." Like when the members vote to stick to cash, bonds, and gems, you sure would not catch one of them pulling a pier or loft job. They respect the ABT rules and regulations.

It is working so smooth we cannot figure why nobody thinks of organizing before. Like you plan a job and your driver is hauled in on a drunk and disorderly. Does it stop the job? No—just call Union Hall for another driver. You get a trained, reliable man who knows his work and is honest. Like I say, everything is coming up rosebushes.

In fact, we are sitting in the Union Hall library one afternoon, talking over how smooth it is going, when the Dopester says, "You know what makes me sore, though?" He picks up a paper and smacks it open.

"This," he says, pointing to a headline which says, *Is Capone Gang Active Again?* "Our members never pull a rod on no one. They got no right comparing us with Capone's mob. I got a good mind to write the editor."

"Sure, Dopester, and how you going to sign it?"

He sinks into the red leather armchair like a bug going into one of those Venice flytraps. After a minute he fights loose and picks up another paper. "Take this story in the

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'Trib': *Commissioner Promises Crime Clean-Up.* He don't appreciate how much good we're doing the city. Look at all the dough our boys are spending!

"I see Max strutting by Bonwit's today with a redhead on each arm, both of 'em wearing minks they wasn't wearing yesterday, and Max is sporting his third new suit this week."

Right then Louie, the Cracker Steward, comes hobbling into the library and folds into a leather chair. Like a lift truck, Louie is built for heavy duty, which is how all the Crackers are from wrestling oxygen and acetylene tanks, hence I am surprised when he folds into a chair. I think maybe he has been on the police griddle for three or four days.

Kicking off his shoes, Louie gives out a big sigh. "The missus been dragging me around Lake Forest looking at houses," he explains.

"Didn't know you was planning on moving out," the Dopester says.

"I'm not. It's strictly her own idea. She keeps nagging, 'Get the kids out to a nice place, out where they'll have nice friends and fresh air and sunshine.' Here's Lincoln Park with nothing but fresh air, and she's got her mind set on moving to the country."

"Find anything she likes?"

"Nah. With all the boys moving out, the estates are pretty well picked over. The realtor can't show us a thing worth having, but he says he expects the Police Commissioner's place to be on the market soon, and he promises us first crack."

We sit and watch Louie's toes curl into the carpet, then the Dopester says, "See what I mean, Augie? What's good for the ABT is good for Chicago. Prosperity, that's what made this country great."

It isn't just the city, either, that is getting the profit—it shows even downstate. Here are 122 guys would of been jugged sooner or later working on their own and trying to remember every little detail. You know what that would of cost the state? Just about $67,000 a year, that is what. And that is not counting the costs of trials, which is another solid bundle.

It is prosperity, all right—the Dopester even hires an accountant to handle taxes for the members. One thing we do not need is the Feds poking their noses into ABT business.

But like the Dopester always says, "You gotta watch out when things is running too smooth. Some lug's sure to upset the apple crate."

Not that it looks like an apple crate when the Research Committee suggests we study how to eliminate fingerprints. Nothing like cutting them off, which doesn't work anyway, or grafting, which none of the boys is going to go through an operation for; but with all these new plastics and electronics and radiation and such, they figure there

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ought to be a way of capping the fingertips without going clumsy like gloves.

The vote is nine to one for exploring the idea, with maybe a grant to the University for research. The one local opposing, of course, is the Royal Affiliated Cleaners. The RAC steward is breathing nitro when he goes back to his headquarters and first thing we know, we have a wildcat strike on our hands. 'Least, they claim they are striking over that. I am wondering—the union treasury is loaded again and the Princes are also agitating for full-paid vacations in Miami.

You think that strike doesn't cause commotion! Here we are with three good jobs cased and considering moving in downstate for a couple more, and not a Prince is going to work. Even upping the ante doesn't break the Princes' objections.

The Dopester calls a special meeting at Union Hall, and the full membership turns out excepting for the rank-and-file members of the fingerprint local. Everyone is yapping and it is sounding like maybe a dozen night-deposit alarms touch off, and the Dopester is standing up front with his shiny head bobbing to the whack, whack of his gavel.

"I guess you know the business of this meeting," he says. "Our brothers are busting the very foundations of the ABT. I put the question before the house: What are we going to do about it?"

Prince John's cane is waving in the air and then he stands up. "Speaking for the membership of the Royal Affiliated Cleaners, may I be permitted to protest the unwarranted implication of disloyalty. Our intent is not to put asunder brotherhood, but rather to guarantee for ourselves and posterity the rightful privileges of fraternity and continued equality. As holders of a proud and time-honored tradition without which this union would never have achieved its present prominence, we are mortally wounded at the suggestion of obsolescence. Hoist a petard, gentlemen, and most assuredly you imperil us all!"

There is a big silence, then the Dopester recognizes Louie, the Steward. "Seems to the missus and me that the Princes are trying to pull a big blow on mighty little gas. Nobody is saying nothing about doing away with the Princes or putting them out to pasture or taking away their seniority."

Everyone claps and stamps their feet, hence the Dopester hammers again for attention.

"Louie sums up the defense most neatly. Now the protocol for this situation says we got four choices. One, we concede the point and dump the research project—" This draws numerous boos and hisses "—or two, the Princes file a grievance and work while it is being

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studied—" Prince John shakes his head "—or three, we call in a mediation board—"

"Somebody impartial like the Police Commissioner and J. Edgar Hoover," I suggest from the desk where I am taking minutes.

"—or four, we operate without the Princes and break their wildcat strike." He gets a rising ovation on this.

When the noise dies down, Louie says, "If they get away with throwing a monkey in the works before this project is even approved by the Board, seems any of us has a right to kill anything we don't like that concerns our local."

Everybody claps again except Prince John. He just sits there rolling the cane between his hands.

"What happens to progress," the Dopester asks, "if every local can kill every project concerning them? You don't see the FBI lab sitting on its heels thinking it has found out everything about crime detection. No reason why we should go along with the status quo, either. Progress—that's what made this country great—finding new and better ways of doing things."

So it is moved and passed on a standing vote that we pull off the Third National job as planned, only without the Princes. The matter of wearing gloves we leave to the crew.

Of course, the Cracker has asbestos mitts for when he must place his fingers on the hot steel, but he is not able to adjust the gas mix for his torch with these or any other gloves, hence he is fighting the idea. Nor is the rest of the crew liking to wear gloves, for they are trained to work fast with the fingers, they have not the time to be retrained, and they never find a glove which is the same as no glove. In fact, it is a long period since they are wearing gloves to prevent anything but frostbite.

Hence, the crew decides that everybody takes care of his own prints. They do it before they are unionized, so they can do it now.

Come Wednesday night, the Transport Driver picks up his crew in a souped-up station wagon and heads down La Salle to the Third National, drops off the Breaker around the corner, circles the block till he gets the OK sign, drops off the rest of the crew and the tanks of gas for the torch, and heads for a beer.

Inside the Third National, the crew is real busy, but they are all wearing notes on their lapels reminding them to wipe off fingerprints, and they are keeping the bank clean as if the whole Royal Affiliated Cleaners' membership is on the job.

Outside, the Hawk is dressed like a street cleaner and he starts sweeping if a police cruiser goes by, which isn't often. Otherwise, to stay awake, he is counting the cigarette butts and gum wrappers on the sidewalk, hence he rubs his eyes

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twice when he sees this gang coming down the street. Now, seeing a crowd on LaSalle at three a.m. is about as unlikely as a booze license in Evanston, but the Hawk's identification training tells him they are really there and that this is no ordinary crowd wandering through the financial district.

There is about twenty of them—mostly men, with a few women and kids scattered in for appeal—carrying signs and marching along in pairs. Before you can say "Joliet," they are marching up and down in front of the bank. Darned if they aren't pickets from the Royal Affiliated Cleaners! Even one cute little towhead, up past her bedtime, is carrying a sign that reads *Don't Make My Daddy Obsolete*. She is skipping along with her blonde curls bouncing and her blue-saucer eyes looking up at the Hawk like maybe he is a vulture.

It is enough to jar any self-respecting burglar, hence the Hawk gets nervous and warns the boys inside. Louie, who is substituting because the scheduled cracker over-indulges at the Pizzeria, is already through the inner armor when the warning comes, so he turns up the gas for a faster cut. Here's where specialization and all the Dopester's training pay off: the whole crew stick to their routines smooth as a stripper at a show bar, and they walk out of there with $140,000 cash just as the Transport Driver pulls up.

Although they cross the picket line to pile into the station wagon, no one tries to stop them. Then the Driver spies a police cruiser heading across Adams, so he gets a nervous foot on the gas pedal and roars out of there, leaving the Third National to the pickets . . .

Mitch is rubbing his cauliflower ear to a stop-light red. "You mean to say, with those pickets parading around and a cop cruiser heading up the street, they still make a clean break?"

"Sure," I answer. "It is a clean getaway. They cut over to the Outer Drive and sail north where the crew holes up with the Alibi Ike who's been running a poker tape for the last four hours. The hotel manager is primed to swear they been there all along, and Louie phones the missus to let her know the job is over. What's to worry about? That's organization."

"What about the pickets? Didn't the bulls take them in?"

"Nah—they threaten to haul them in for disturbing the peace, but the Princes have ready a story about a lodge initiation. They promise to behave themselves, hence the cops let them go. That little towhead sure has appeal."

"Quite a tale," Mitch says admiringly. "I sure have something to tell the boys when I get back to the Coast. Is the ABT looking for new members?"

Up in the sky one cloud is shap-

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ing up like a Black Maria. "The ABT is out of business," I say. "Thursday, the cops start pulling in the crew from the Third National job. It is the Princes showing up that throws it. The crew is doing okay till then, but when the picket line forms, the boys remember only their time-study training, hence the cops find prints on the vault, on the boxes, on white marble, on black marble, on brass, on furniture, on the door—everywhere.

"Always it is one-for-all and all-for-one in the ABT, so Louie figures if he is headed for the jug, the Princes are doing time too. Next thing, everybody is squealing on everybody, and the cops are raiding Union Hall for the membership lists. It sure ruins the ABT."

Mitch is scratching his ear again. "Bum rap, Augie, a real bum rap. If you can't trust your own brotherhood, who can you trust?"

"That is what the Dopester says—loyalty, that's what made this country great, and if you can't find loyalty in your own brotherhood . . . It really busts him up."

Now the cloud pictures are looking like only rain, hence I flop on the bed to examine the ceiling cracks. One zigs like a dollar sign, which reminds me of a thought to share with Mitch. "The cops do not know what they are doing when they break up the ABT. That is the winter of '60. I got no ideas on what causes the recession elsewhere, but I sure know that breaking up the Amalgamated Burglary Trades helps bring it on Chicago.

"Figure it out: 122 members each netting fifty grand a year—that is better'n six million that stops circulating. Jug the members and that money rots in the bank instead of working for prosperity. Clark Street's full of bums again. Avenue shops are latching doors for keeps. North Shore real estate's hard hit with big places standing empty.

"Like the Dopester says, You can't sit on the silver with lead in your britches. Dough circulating—that's what made this country great." I notice my fingers are pinching a crease down the front of my gray trousers. "So you see the Dopester in the tailor shop? Glad to know he is around—I've missed the guy."

My mouth is dry from steady talking and I am hungry, hence I check my watch for the hour.

"Must be chow time," Mitch says. "If they got stew again, I'm going to complain. Stew three times in one week is too much. You with me?"

"Nah—I am up on a five to ten. With a clean record the parole board might trim it. If you wish to yelp to the Warden, do it on your own."

"Guess you're right—but with the taxpayers shelling out all that dough to rehabilitate us, I can tell them it ain't going to work—not on stew three times a week. We'll organize!"

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a new Secret Service story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL GILBERT**
TITLE:	***Melodrama in Three Acts***
TYPE:	Counterespionage
AGENT:	Mr. Calder
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Of the four master spies in England, one operated in the London area. He was known to Intelligence as the Headmaster, and he was probably the most dangerous enemy still at large . . .*

THE MASTER SPIES AT WORK IN this country numbered, last year, exactly four. They were known to Intelligence as the Language Master, the Science Master, the Games Master, and, in some undefined position of authority over all of them, the Headmaster.

Since the Portsmouth affair there have been but two. The Language Master was behind bars, and the Games Master had retired to Switzerland. The Science Master was still at his shadowy work in the Midlands; and the Headmaster was in the London area.

When it is said that Intelligence knew about these men, it must be understood that it was a matter of analysis and deduction rather than of knowledge. A lot of confidential information was reaching the other side, much of it unimportant, but some of it highly important. Most of such items could be traced to their sources, and the lines drawn from these sources pointed inward and came together somewhere in the center of the Metropolis.

"If I had to create the Headmaster," said Mr. Fortescue, "in the way that a scientist creates a megalosaurus, from small fragments of tooth and bone, I should have to construct someone with the combined knowledge of a cabinet minister, a senior Civil Servant, and a don."

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"An all-round man," said Mr. Calder. "Have we any hopeful line at all?"

"We have a line," said Mr. Fortescue. "I'm not sure if it's hopeful or not. Craven has disappeared."

"John Craven? I've seen nothing in the papers—"

"It will be there. Somewhat prominently, I'm afraid."

Since John Craven was a Queen's Counsel, and Recorder of a Kentish Borough, this seemed only too probable.

"He went down from his Chambers, by car, on Saturday morning to his house at Charing. He was planning to return to town on Sunday night. The first time we knew anything was wrong was when he failed to turn up for a conference on Monday morning."

"Yesterday."

"Yes. We got busy at once."

"Of course," said Mr. Calder. John Craven was one of his oldest friends. Mr. Calder was perfectly aware that he had another occupation besides his legal one.

"His car was still in the garage of his Charing house. The daily woman, who cooks for him, and cleans the house, saw him start out for a walk after lunch on Sunday."

"He was a great walker," said Mr. Calder. He thought of his old friend, striding along a woodland path, his red-cheeked, white-topped head bent forward, his gnarled stick swinging. "Have you any reason to connect it with the Headmaster?"

"Two reasons," said Mr. Fortescue. "First, Craven was one of three men who had been specially assigned to locating him. He'd had, so far, absolutely no apparent success. Had he found out anything, he would have reported it at once."

"Of course," said Mr. Calder.

"However, the path that he was treading must have taken him, unknowingly, very close to the man—too close for Craven's comfort."

"You mentioned two reasons."

"It has the feel of a professional job," said Mr. Fortescue. "Carefully arranged, perfectly executed."

"I expect you're right," said Mr. Calder. He had never known Fortescue wrong in any really important matter. "Just what would you like me to do?"

"The first thing must be to find Craven. I'd like it done, if possible, before the news is made public. I have informed our friends in the Special Branch. They can control ordinary police inquiry for a reasonable period, but I don't think we can keep the papers off it for more than forty-eight hours."

"I'll see what I can do," said Mr. Calder. "There was a sister. A widow. What was her name?"

"Mrs. Gordon. I have written down her address and telephone number. A very sensible woman. You should find her a great help."

So Mr. Calder and Mrs. Gordon traveled down to Charing together, and on Charing platform they found reinforcements.

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"This is my friend, Mr. Behrens. He is a keen naturalist. I felt that four pairs of eyes would be better than two."

"It's very good of you to take so much trouble," said Mrs. Gordon. "Did you say four—" She turned and found a great dog had moved up silently behind her. Its head came well above her waist.

"Oh," she said. "He's beautiful."

Rasselas eyed her coldly. For Mr. Calder, who seemed to talk to him in his own tongue, the dog would do anything. He had become accustomed to Mr. Behrens, and even allowed himself to be taken by him in his car when he understood from Mr. Behrens' manner that the matter was urgent. But this was the limit of Rasselas' tolerance.

"I spent a little time on the way down," said Mr. Calder, "working out, with Mrs. Gordon's help, the sort of walks her brother might have taken in the time available. Ah, you've got the maps—good."

Mrs. Gordon said, "Truscott, his head clerk, told me that he planned to be back in London well before dinner. He had some papers to read, and he hated reading after dinner. That would have meant leaving Charing at five at the latest—and he liked to get his own tea before starting back."

"Two hours, almost exactly," said Mr. Calder. "Less, if he wanted, but certainly not more."

"He'd go as far as he could in that time. There were two walks I've been on with him which would have fitted in almost exactly. There's not much to choose between them."

They spent a long morning, without result. What had taken the quick-striding barrister two hours to cover, cost them nearly four. There were parts of it—along used roads and past houses—which they could ignore. But the rest had to be studied carefully.

After a quick lunch at a pub they started on the second round. The path rose almost at once, on a long slant, climbing the downs toward a wood.

"They could have watched him from up there—by the way, Mrs. Gordon knows what we fear may have happened."

"I knew John did secret service work. He didn't talk about it, of course."

"Of course not," said Mr. Calder.

The path plunged into the wood—it turned out to be a mere screen of trees—and then out again onto the downland.

Rasselas ran free, ahead of them, his tail feathering in the breeze. Occasionally his nose dipped to the ground and rose again as he ran. He was like a great golden galleon, answering to the first chops of the open sea.

"We won't waste much time here," said Mr. Calder. "It's lonely enough, but it's a lot too open. John had his wits about him. And he carried a gun."

The path turned and ran along

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the ridgeway. There were small coppices, which were promising, and which they searched carefully, but without success. Rasselas watched them, and from time to time Mr. Calder talked to him.

"He's not a bloodhound," Mr. Calder explained. "And there's no question of him acting as a tracker. What he's been trained to do is to notice when things are wrong—when they've been moved, or altered. Anyone hiding in the bushes there, for instance, would have upset the pattern of the branches when he came out. Or if something which had been standing in the same place for some time has been shifted, it leaves a mark. That sort of thing."

Rasselas sat on his haunches, grinning quietly as he watched Mr. Calder talking.

"He hasn't shown much interest yet," said Mr. Behrens.

"He'll tell us as soon as he sees anything."

They had already covered nearly fifteen miles that day and were getting tired by the time they came to the deserted farm. The path skirted the farm yard. Under the collapsed Dutch barn there still lay a few trusses of gray and moldy hay. Most of the tiles were off the roof and daylight showed through the walls. The nettle was in full command of the garden and yard.

Rasselas padded quietly to the back of the house, and when he did not reappear, Mr. Calder went to look for him. He was sitting on his haunches, still as stone, looking at a rusty rainwater tank, propped on its side against the broken brick wall.

In the tank, his knees to his chin, was John Craven.

"There were three men involved," said Mr. Calder to Mr. Fortescue. "And you were right—the planning was meticulous. As John reached the corner of the farm, one man, directly ahead of him, attracted his attention, and made him stop. There were two other men, one on each side, behind him and hidden. One hit him, to stun him, the other caught his arms as he fell, and held him while the first one hit him again, this time hard enough to break his neck."

"How do you know all this?"

"Rasselas worked it out for me," said Mr. Calder. Then, after a pause, "What next?"

"The finding of the body will be given to the Press. In the public version the body will have been found by hikers, *behind* the tank, not in it. Craven's walking habits will be mentioned. It will be strongly suggested that Craven felt faint, sat down to rest, and died of heart failure. There will be an inquest, of course. But the only evidence will be evidence of his identity. And an adjournment for—how long will you require?"

"It depends on what I have to do," said Mr. Calder cautiously.

"The Headmaster took a great

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risk in acting as he did. He must have felt that Craven represented a very real danger. And yet, curiously, Craven didn't know it. If he had suspected anything, he would have reported at once."

"Yes," said Mr. Calder.

"What you will have to do is to trace Craven's movements, his professional and social contacts, and try to discover why he should have become so dangerous without realizing it. Would a month be enough?"

Mr. Calder said, "I ought to know, by the end of a month, if there is any chance."

The first person he called on was Truscott. His head clerk, Truscott, and his sister, Mrs. Gordon, were the only two people who knew that John Craven was more than a very successful barrister; and of the two, Truscott had been deeper in his confidence.

Mr. Calder sat in the barrister's neat room in Crown Office Row, overlooking the lawn of Middle Temple Gardens. It was a room walled with books. There were other books, marked with slips of paper, on a side table, along with a pile of briefs which would now have to be returned, a book diary with professional appointments, a flat desk-diary with private engagements, and a locked cabinet of personal papers.

"He was a very methodical man," said Truscott.

"I hope it will make our job a bit easier," said Mr. Calder. He had explained to Truscott what he planned to do. "We'll start by listing everyone he saw privately in the last six months. The names will be in his private engagement book."

"I think this will help us, too," said Truscott. He produced, from the cabinet, a folder marked *Personal*. "He kept all private letters here, and carbons of his replies. If he answered them by hand, he often made a spare copy."

"We'll use one as a check against the other. As a further cross-check, would you get your telephone operator to give us a note of any numbers he called. If she doesn't keep a record, the Post Office could, at least, give us the toll calls."

"She keeps a record," said Truscott. "I'm not sure if it goes back six months, but I'll find out."

There followed a fortnight of work as hard and demanding as any that Mr. Calder could remember. He sat at John Craven's desk from nine o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night. He was introduced to the other members of the Chambers as Craven's literary executor; Craven had been a frequent contributor to all sorts of Journals, on legal and non-legal topics, and had published two books of essays and reminiscences. Many of the friends whom Mr. Calder so patiently checked came from Fleet Street and New Fetter Lane.

The professional contacts caused little trouble. With Truscott's assist-

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ance he was able, in the first two days, to identify and put to one side the various solicitors who had consulted Craven professionally.

This left a clutter of personal friends, relations, literary contacts, people he had met in the course of his political work, tradesmen, Club acquaintances, and odd members of the public who will write to anyone whose name is known and who is foolish enough to have his address in the telephone book. A Christmas card list, with notes on some of the recipients, also proved invaluable.

After a week of such work Mr. Calder felt so limp that he thought he might be in for a bout of 'flu. But he was not dissatisfied with his results.

"There are three people," he said, "that I'd like to concentrate on. Any one of them could have access to secret information. And all three are new acquaintances."

Truscott looked over his shoulder at the names Mr. Calder had jotted down.

"Sir George Gould," Truscott said. "He's something in the Treasury, I believe. Mr. Craven met him over his work with the Inns of Court Conservative Association. They were both concerned in the drafting of a new Rating Bill. General Hamish Fairside. He works in the War Office."

"Military Intelligence," said Mr. Calder.

"Freddie Lake. The name is familiar, but I don't think I ever met him."

"You're lucky," said Mr. Calder. "I have."

In the course of a long career, Sir Frederick Lake had held nearly every conceivable post in the Foreign Service, had visited nearly every known country in the world, and had developed into nearly the most compulsive bore of his generation.

"I'd better start with General Fairside," said Mr. Calder. "I have a nodding acquaintance with him. Let's have a look at Who's Who."

"Clubs. United Service, Naval & Military, and the Hambone." He turned the pages until he came to "Gould. George Anstruther, educated Winchester and New College, Oxford." His clubs were the United University—and the Hambone.

"This is too true to be good," said Mr. Calder. With fumbling fingers he turned to the letter L.

Sir Frederick Lake belonged to no fewer than six clubs. The Hambone was fourth on the list.

Mr. Calder sat still, turning this odd coincidence over in his mind. A further thought struck him.

"Did Mr. Craven belong to any clubs?"

"He was a member of the Travellers, sir."

"No other ones?"

"Fairly recently, I remember, he was talking about joining the Hambone. But you know what these clubs are like, sir. There was some

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opposition, somewhere, so of course he withdrew his application."

"I wonder," said Mr. Calder. "I wonder."

The Hambone Club in Carver Street is the offspring of that eccentric aristocrat, Sir Rownsley Clayton. Having been turned out of the Athenaeum for giving a dinner there for a troupe of clowns, he had founded it as a place where he could meet his more Bohemian acquaintances. It was still much used by actors and writers, but had acquired a solid addition of politicians who found the Carlton too stuffy, and of soldiers who found the Senior too exclusive.

It was to the Hambone Club that Mr. Calder was now making his way. Three weeks had passed since the death of John Craven. Mr. Calder had not hurried. The quarry he was hunting, if it existed at all, would await his coming.

He was conscious, as he walked through the misty, lamplit streets, of a feeling close to guilt. He was breaking one of the oldest rules of the game. For so slight, so intangible, so elusive had been the clue on which he had stumbled that he had not yet dared to record his suspicions. Possibly "suspicions" was too concrete a word altogether. It was a breath, a whisper, no more than the first faint stirring of apprehension.

Yet, when General Fairside, their acquaintanceship skillfully renewed, had invited him to dinner at the Hambone, and had mentioned, casually, that George Gould might be joining them for a drink afterward, he had paused to consider matters very carefully. In the end, he had slipped into the special pocket of his coat an automatic pistol. It had, like its owner, a short, stout body, and it was equipped with a most efficient silencer. The moment he had put it into his pocket, he had felt the extravagance of the action. Nevertheless, he had allowed it to remain.

Mr. Calder found his host warming himself in front of a hospitable fire of logs.

"Nice of you to come out on a night like this," he boomed. "What are you drinking? Nonsense. Must have something before we start eating. Take away the taste of the food."

Over an excellent dinner they talked about the Service Charity in which Mr. Calder was interested, and which was the ostensible reason for their meeting; and about old friends in and out of the Army. The General had been a subaltern in a Rifle Regiment which had shared, with Mr. Calder's Regiment in 1918, a particularly unpleasant section of the line.

"Sensible of you not to stay on in the Army," said the General. "No future in it."

"I wouldn't say that," said Mr. Calder.

"Oh, it suited someone like me. I meant, for a brainy chap like you.

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By the way, what *did* you go in for?"

"Import and export," said Mr. Calder promptly. "What excellent Burgundy this is!"

"I'm glad you like it. They know how to buy wine in this Club. *And* how to look after it. Barlow! My guest likes the Corton."

Barlow, who was the doyen of the Hambone staff, smiled politely.

"I am glad you enjoyed it, sir," he said. He sailed off down the room to attend to a thick, black-haired man, who had just come in.

"That's Sir George Gould, isn't it?" asked Mr. Calder.

"That's him. Doesn't look like a senior Treasury official, does he?"

"To be absolutely candid, I think he looks like a retired boxer."

"Not bad. Not bad at all. I fought him myself, in the first interregimental tournament after the war. He was in the Sixtieth. A dirty fighter, though. We'll lure him along with a glass of brandy after dinner."

No lure was needed. Sir George came over, as drawn by a magnet, was introduced to Mr. Calder, and was given a large brandy. Mr. Calder settled himself in one of the large leather armchairs which make the coffee room of the Hambone one of the best sitting-out places in London. Sir George, he reflected, would be a very difficult man to fool. His had been a lifetime of Committees and desk work—a lifetime of watching the wheels go round, and occasionally of making them turn.

He was in an unbuttoned mood now, telling stories of Under-Secretaries and their ways, of experiences at the bar of the House of Commons, of the foibles of his own master. Another brandy, thought Mr. Calder, and he might become thunderingly indiscreet. Or would he? There was an inner wall of cold reserve in those gray eyes which were turned directly on Mr. Calder from time to time.

It was quite late when the General said, "Hullo, Freddie, come and join us"—and Mr. Calder looked up and saw the tall, spare figure of Sir Frederick Lake bearing down on them.

A sense of completion seized Mr. Calder. It was the feeling which assails a scientist when, at the end of a long and difficult series of calculations, full of imponderables and unknown quantities, he feels the shifting ground hardening under his feet at last. It was a sense of satisfaction—but mingled with alarm.

He had known that Sir Frederick would come. His arrival had been part of a ritual. How often, he wondered, had these three men met together in this way, in this place, at this hour of night?

Mr. Calder shifted in his seat, and felt the weight of the automatic pressing against his stomach.

"I think we could all do with another drink," said Sir Frederick. "What would you like? Port or

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brandy? George? General? And you, sir?"

"It's too late for formal introductions," said the General. "But this is Mr. Calder. He's an old friend of mine. And he knew John Craven very well indeed."

The diplomat bowed, very slightly, toward Mr. Calder, and said, "A sad business. All the same, when it happens, it's not a bad way out, is it?"

Mr. Calder felt three pairs of eyes on him, and his lips were dry. He said, "I suppose not—no."

"In the open air," said the General. "On a Sunday afternoon walk. Quite suddenly. I'd settle for that myself, eh?"

"If I am destined to die quite suddenly," said Sir George, "I think I should like it to be when I was in the box of the House of Commons at question time. Imagine the look on the Minister's face—"

The three men laughed. Sir Frederick, still standing, said, "May I have your orders, gentlemen?"

Sir George and the General said "Brandy" in perfect unison. Mr. Calder said, "At this time of night, I'm very fond of a half pint of bitters."

"An excellent choice," said Sir Frederick, and rang the bell. "In certain circumstances, the grain and the grape go very well together. I can only suggest one amendment. You should have a pint, not half."

"I will fall in with your suggestion," said Mr. Calder.

The benign figure of Barlow appeared out of the gloom and Sir Frederick gave the order.

"I sometimes wonder," said the General, "if Barlow ever goes to bed. If you want a drink at any time between ten o'clock and four in the morning, he always brings it himself."

"He sends the younger waiters home," said Sir George, "and sits, in solitary splendor, in a great padded chair in some sort of pantry next to the kitchen. On one occasion, when the electric bell was out of order, I penetrated to his lair."

"I picture him," said the General, "as leading a Regency life, going to bed at six in the morning and getting up at lunchtime—"

This speculation was cut short by the reappearance of Barlow. He was bearing, on a silver salver, three glasses of brandy and a half-pint tankard of beer.

"Barlow," said Sir Frederick, "that's the first time in twenty years I have known you make a mistake. I said a pint."

Even in the gloom Mr. Calder could see the man flush. Mr. Calder said hastily, "That's quite all right. Don't think of changing it. It'll do me very nicely."

In truth, he had only one idea now—to get the three men out of the Club. Patience, patience, and still more patience. Mr. Calder, who had played many waiting games in his life, had rarely been tried more severely than he was that night.

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But all things must have an end, even Sir Frederick Lake's anecdotes. Two o'clock was striking as Mr. Calder followed his three hosts down the steps of the Hambone Club, past the empty porter's hutch, through the great doors, and out into the street.

There were three cars there. Mr. Calder said, "I won't trouble any of you for a lift. My flat is only ten minutes away, and I'd welcome the walk. And thank you, General, once more, for a most enjoyable evening."

As soon as he had turned the corner he paused, drew into a doorway, and waited. He could hear the three voices—a laugh, shouted good-nights—then the slamming of car doors, and finally, three separate cars, starting and driving away. Then silence.

While they had been sitting in the Club, the mist had thickened. Since he had to move, and more quickly now, mist might be a useful ally.

He turned about, and walked back the way he had come. The porter's hutch was still empty. One of Barlow's self-imposed duties would be locking up as soon as the last member had taken himself home to bed.

The lights in the inner hall had been reduced to one reading lamp. From the walls the pictures of actors and actresses looked down from their heavy gold frames. Their incurious eyes followed Mr. Calder as he tiptoed across the floor.

"A melodrama," thought Mr. Calder, "in three acts. Act One: a deserted farmstead. Act Two: a barrister's Chambers. Act Three: a London Club."

He pulled on a pair of cotton gloves, before opening the baize-covered door. His rubber-soled shoes made no noise on the flagstones.

The Club kitchen lay at the end of the passage. The door was open, and from a room leading off it a light showed. Mr. Calder drifted across, silent as thistledown.

He pushed the door open with his gun.

Barlow was not sitting in the great padded chair which the General had described. He was standing beside it, working at the leather upholstery.

"Good evening, Headmaster," said Mr. Calder.

"I recognized you when you came here this evening." The voice was harsh. The tones of the well-bred club servant had disappeared with the deferential smile. The face was grinning—but it was the grin of a death mask. "I should have taken steps at once. First, Craven—then you."

"I suppose it's no use me telling you that Craven suspected nothing, that you killed him to no purpose."

"I could not afford to take a chance."

Mr. Calder said, "I imagine there is some sort of concealed microphone in the coffee room, behind where the eminent gossips sit and

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gossip over their brandies? And a listening apparatus in this room?"

"You imagine correctly. The microphone and receiver are removable. Only the wiring is permanent."

"And the receiver is somewhere in that chair?"

"It was. I have removed it. In ten more minutes I should have had the whole apparatus dismantled."

"It is interesting to reflect," said Mr. Calder, "that had Sir Frederick Lake indulged in one more reminiscence, you would have got away with all this."

"I should like very much to know how you found out."

"Oh, it was really a stupid little thing," said Mr. Calder. "You brought me the half pint of beer which you *overheard* me asking for, instead of the pint which Sir Frederick actually told you to bring."

"Ah!" said the man. He raised his hand, without haste, to his mouth. The stench of cyanide filled the room. As Mr. Calder watched, the man's body arched, clung for a moment with hands braced to the chair back, then fell heavily to the floor.

Before he left, Mr. Calder removed the microphone and the receiver. He left the wiring. It would attract no notice—London clubs are full of aged and inexplicable wiring.

Mr. Calder was in bed by three, and asleep ten minutes later.

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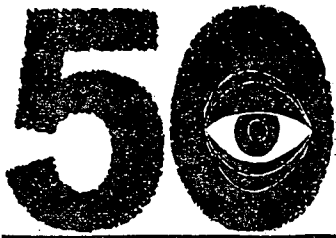

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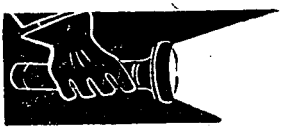

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recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **TALMAGE POWELL**

TITLE: ***A Break in the Weather***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

DETECTIVE: Sheriff John

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Old Pearly lived alone up on Lake Poco, and at best his mind was like a child's. And now, on a freezing winter day, he came down to tell the Sheriff a tall tale . . .*

PEARLY JENKINS CHOSE A COLD, clear, brittle winter day to reveal his discovery—a day with the sky frozen to blue silence, a day when nothing should have happened.

I was at my desk catching up on paper work. I paused to load my pipe, and when I glanced up, I was startled to see Pearly standing patiently in the open doorway of my office.

A lean and grizzled old man, Pearly was dressed in his usual tattered and motley hand-me-downs. The cold, which he'd endured on his long trek down from Lake Poco, had given his face the appearance of a plum pudding with a cherry stuck in the middle.

His blue eyes had a quality in common with the cold sky outside. He took off his cap and shuffled into the office. "Good morning, Sheriff John."

"How are you, Pearly?"

"At peace now," he said. "I'm ready to confess and take my medicine."

I was faintly irritated. In some ways Pearly has the mind of a ten-year-old. "I haven't heard of any crimes might be laid at your door."

"Oh, I done this in secret. Covered up the fact of a murder, I did."

He was so woebegone it was hard to get really sore at him. "Come now, Pearly, these Pennsylvania hills haven't seen a killing in a long time."

He stood blinking and frowning. "We've had one," he said doggedly. "We've sure had one." Sudden tears

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came to his eyes. "She's so beautiful, Sheriff John, like a sleeping princess."

"Who, Pearly?"

"Mavis. Mavis Worsham."

He was the sort of old fellow who just naturally called on your more charitable instincts. Right now, my urge to comfort him was mingled with a desire to kick him out of the office.

"Pearly, why don't you leave that lonely cabin and stay here in the county seat for a while? We'll find something for you to do."

"Don't you believe me, Sheriff John?"

"I reckon I can't. Mavis Worsham left here nearly three months ago. She was bored here. She told me herself it had been a mistake for her to return to her home town after living in the city so long. She got the yen for brighter lights and went to Scranton."

He inched closer to my desk and said softly, "A tale to cover up her murder—that's all it is, Sheriff John. She never got out of this county!"

He was chipping away at my patience. "She wrote a note back here after she reached Scranton, Pearly. Did you know that?"

His eyes were confused for a moment. "Who'd she write to?"

"Me, and I still have the letter kicking around here in my desk someplace. The cottage she rented belonged to summer people. She'd agreed to keep it through the winter. The rent was paid, everything in order. But leaving ahead of time, she asked me to keep an eye on the place until the summer folks returned."

Pearly's brow knotted. His eyes were full of pain as his mind worked. Then an inspiration lighted his furrowed face. "The note was a forgery—that's what it was, Sheriff John!"

"You get hold of yourself, Pearly. The note was in Mavis' own handwriting."

"Then," he said stubbornly, "the person who murdered her forced her to write the note—and after she was dead, he took it to Scranton and mailed it. A dad-burned slick and mean trick to make it look like she really left."

I was now beginning to worry a little. Pearly had spent a short period in the state mental hospital several years ago, following the death of his wife.

I got up, moved over to him, took his arms, and eased him gently into the big old leather chair near my desk. "All right, Pearly. I guess we better talk this over. Who would want to kill a girl like Mavis?"

"There was talk about her, Sheriff John," he said, his voice breaking slightly. "Loose woman—men slipping in her back door—only there was good in her, I know it for a fact! She let me work for her, and paid me too."

"Sure, Pearly. And don't think about the gossip. There's always

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talk about a girl like Mavis, beautiful, blonde, and different than most of the village women."

"Lordy . . ." he groaned. "Beautiful as she was, there was truth in the gossip—first she got herself in a family way, and then she got herself killed."

"You don't know what you're saying, Pearly!"

"Yes, I do, too. Day or two before she left—before she was murdered—I overheard her talking on the phone. She was telling some man she was going to have a baby. Must have been someone important, 'cause she said it was going to cost him plenty."

Pearly raised his head, his eyes imploring me to believe him. Unaccountably, a shiver crossed my shoulders. I had a mental picture of our Main Street, snug and secure in its clean blanket of snow, where the important men in town were safe and comfortable in their shops and offices.

"Pearly, are you *absolutely* sure about this? Positive you didn't imagine it up there in the loneliness of Poco?"

"I'm all the way positive," he cried. "You see now why she was killed?"

"I can see why she *might* have been. But you haven't told me why you think she was."

He glanced spookily about the office. "I've got her up there. I slid her under the floor of the shack, because the sun don't shine there."

"I see," I said, although I didn't see at all. "You don't want the sun shining on her?"

"Not the pale winter sun, Sheriff John. She's beautiful, just like the day she died. Resting there and smiling at me, if I look real close. Dreamy and wavery, kind of, in the ice."

"When did you find her, Pearly?"

"Three days ago. I went clear to the upper end of the lake and was about to chop a fishing hole in the ice when I felt like I wasn't alone. She was friz there—friz in the ice. I went back to the cabin and fetched my sledge and a saw. I cut the ice around her, real careful-like, and the block floated free and easy while I put ropes around it and brought her out."

He sat kneading his knuckles as the experience unfolded in his mind. "She had a little smile on her lips and the yellow hair like cobwebs around her face. I sat with her the rest of the afternoon."

"What did you plan to do, Pearly?"

"Just have her around, I guess—somebody who'd trusted and liked me. I knowed what had happened to her. She had marks on her throat—made when she'd been strangled. Around her waist a piece of knotted leather strap. At the other end, I figured, somebody had put a heavy weight and dropped her in the lake, so's the water creatures would devour the evidence before spring. Only a muskrat or a turtle had eat

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through the strap. She'd floated to the surface, where the freeze had protected her with ice."

"I see," I said, and this time I was beginning to.

"Long as the ice holds," he said, "she'll stay the same. But a break is coming in the weather. Yesterday I went to the valley below the dam. There were trickles in the low places, and green shoots in the ground. The change will climb higher—until it reaches the ice."

His voice broke. His eyes beheld a private nightmare. Then he said, "I realized I done a bad thing. I knew I tampered with powers I oughtn't to. I understood why she'd been put in the ice."

"Why, Pearly?"

"So's you can catch her murderer," he said with utter simplicity.

I used a Jeep with four-wheeled drive for the trip up to Pearly's squatter's shack. When the Jeep could go no farther, we got out and walked the remaining three hundred yards to the tumble-down house where the keeper of the old dam had lived many years ago.

Wind had blown away the loose snow. The crust was firm underfoot. Evergreens stood tall and slim, and bluish-white hills rolled one behind the other to the darkening horizon. Below, the lake glittered, following the contours of the hills until it twisted out of sight.

Pearly didn't seem to feel the sting of the cold wind that was stabbing across the peaks. He was running ahead of me now, his quick breath making little puffs of fog in the air.

"Foller me, Sheriff John!" he was yelling. "She's right here. I'll show you!"

The weathered old house with its crumbling chimney rested, without a cellar, on squat, low stone pillars. Pearly raced to the lower corner of the house, threw himself down, and wriggled underneath.

By the time I huffed up, he'd slid a block of ice out and was standing beside it, a sweat slick on his old face despite the cold.

"*Now* I guess you'll believe me, Sheriff John!"

I looked down at the cake of ice. It was about two feet wide by six feet long. Carefully cut. Dragged here with great effort—and no small degree of danger, considering that Pearly might have fallen in or had the ice cave in under him.

I hardly knew how to say it to him. "Pearly . . . sometimes when even a good, gentle fellow like you is lonely and isolated for too long . . ."

He grabbed my arm and stared wildly into my eyes. Then he dropped beside the cake of ice and ran his hands up and down the surface as if he could straighten out the light waves.

"Sheriff John, she's *in* there, I tell you! Look at the last light catching her hair . . !"

I took him by the shoulders and

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pulled him to his feet. "Take it easy, Pearly."

"Damn you," he shouted, "you look in there and *see* her!"

"I've looked, Pearly."

An intense trembling passed through him. He turned without warning and started to run.

"Pearly!"

I lunged after him. I might not have caught him if he hadn't slipped as he rounded the corner of the house.

He was almost on his feet when I reached him. But I was prepared for him now. I pushed him hard to the ground, smothering him with my weight.

He writhed and screamed and fought me viciously until, in the midst of our thrashing, I finally got the handcuffs on him. With the click of the steel he became suddenly calm.

Very quietly he began to sob . . .

Only a few lights showed in the village when we got back. I unlocked the county building and led him to my office. He had continued that subdued weeping all the way down from Poco.

Now he slumped in a chair, his shoulders twitching. His back looked more hunched, his bowed head more ancient than the aged, blue-white hills.

Looking at him, I felt heavy with sorrow. "Pearly, whatever am I going to do with you?"

"I don't know." He lifted his head "Please . . . don't put me back in that hospital. I'll die if I have to go back there. You don't want me to die, do you?"

"No, Pearly—and I don't think you'd harm anyone."

"I never have, Sheriff John—you know I never did."

"All right, Pearly, I'll take a chance on you. You can work around my place for a while and we'll see how things go."

"You won't be sorry, Sheriff John. Only . . ."

"Yes, Pearly?"

"You won't tell folks about me cutting that cake of ice? The way they'd josh me . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Pearly. We'll forget the whole thing. I promise you, I'll never give anyone in the village any reason for needling or hazing you."

He wiped his nose, then smiled at me with gratitude. The feeling was, strangely enough, rather mutual. Old Pearly had come straight to me with his tall tale. Now I'd tuck him in a warm, comfortable cell for the night. It would give me plenty of time to return to Poco, melt the ice, and bury Mavis—this time permanently.

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THE "LAUGHING MAN" MURDERS

by PATRICK QUENTIN

THE OLD WOMAN'S VOICE ON THE telephone was almost incoherent with terror: ". . . and he laughed, I say! When he shot my son he was laughing all the time. A terrible, mad laugh."

In the August heat of the squad room, Inspector Martin Field, who had planned on taking the afternoon off to go sailing with his nephew, scribbled notes: *Homicide. Victim: Sylvester Twing, 14 Jubilee Street. Reported by mother. 3:15* P.M.

"Then you saw the murderer, Mrs. Twing?"

"No, no! I can't see anything. I'm blind. And I'm all alone. Hurry! He may come back again to kill me—the laughing man."

The Laughing Man! Mrs. Twing was the first to use that phrase which, in a few hours, was to sweep across San Francisco like the Great Fire . . .

She opened the door to them; tiny, terrified, and insubstantial as a ghost. The house was a ghost, too—an improbable survival from the 1910s, crammed between two warehouses in a neighborhood which had long since succumbed to industrial expansion sprawling up from the Bay.

Mrs. Twing was wearing a nightgown and a woolen bed jacket. Her feet were bare like a child's, in grotesque contrast to the old seamed face with its blank eyes. She stretched quivering hands toward Martin Field and the homicide squad crowding in behind him.

"My son," she moaned. "Oh, my son, my son."

They found the body in a large living room cluttered with ponder-

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ous Victorian furniture. Thick red draperies cut the summer sunlight to a dim pink radiance. Sylvester Twing was lying in a corner under two murky pictures of fruit in baskets. On a claw-legged table beside him sat a plump stuffed Pekingese under a glass bell; it was eerily alive-looking with its blue-button eyes.

The police doctor had dropped to his knees by the body. Martin Field, the youngest and most thorough Inspector on the San Francisco police force, looked down at the victim. Sylvester Twing had been shot in the heart. He was about fifty-five, with a dry, unfriendly face, thinning hair, and, even in death, a certain air of self-righteousness. The blood didn't show much. It had seeped into the formal blue serge of his suit.

"Okay, boys, take it from here," Martin said. "I'll take care of the old lady."

He found Mrs. Twing, near collapse, in the hall. He carried her up the gloomy stairs to her bedroom. He was as big as she was small. In his arms she looked like a forlorn and faded doll.

"The laughing man," she was whimpering. "Oh, that terrible laughing man!"

He put her down on the bed. She was still much too frightened to make any sense. But gradually, as he coaxed a little calm into her, bits of information came out.

The house had belonged to a Miss Van Loon, a once-wealthy old spinster. Mrs. Twing and her son, who were English, had worked there as cook and butler for twenty-five years. Even after Mrs. Twing went blind, Miss Van Loon had kept her on. And a few months ago, when the owner died, it was found she had willed the house to Sylvester.

"Her people came from Holland," Mrs. Twing said. "She had no family. No friends. Just Sylvester and me. We were always good to her. We've never done anyone any harm. Why, oh, why should that dreadful man—?"

"You've got to tell me what happened, Mrs. Twing, if you want me to help you."

"I'll try. It was like a nightmare. But I'll try."

She had been in bed that afternoon. She was almost always in bed now because of her heart. About three o'clock she had heard a car drive up to the rear of the house and her son go to answer the back doorbell.

There had already been a visitor that morning around nine thirty. A man. She didn't know who it had been. Her son never told her things and she didn't pry. But people very seldom came to the house. When the second visitor arrived she was curious. She sat up in bed and listened.

"I heard their footsteps, the two of them, going through the hall to the living room. I couldn't hear their voices, not from my bedroom.

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But then, after a minute or two, I heard the laugh." She gave a sob. "Oh, I can't tell you what it was like. Long and loud and—and sort of cackling. It was mad. It was a madman's laugh."

She twisted around on the bed toward him. "I was terrified. But I was terrified for Sylvester, too. I made myself get up and go out in the passage. I reached the head of the stairs, and the laugh came again—booming, rolling around the house. My heart was pounding. I thought I was going to have an attack. Then the laughter stopped and I heard him speak. It was as clear as if I'd been down there in the room with them. He said—" She broke off.

"Yes, Mrs. Twing. What did he say?"

In a slow, awed whisper she breathed, "He said, 'You must have known I'd be back sooner or later. This time I've come to get you all, Sylvester—you, Bernard, George, and Ramona.'"

"Bernard, George, and Ramona. Who are they?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of any of them. But that's what he said. And then—then he started to laugh again, and there was a shot."

Her hand fluttered to her mouth. "Oh, if you knew what it is like to be blind, to be in darkness, not to be able to see! I stood there. I don't know how long. I couldn't move. Then I heard the footsteps. They were coming out of the living room toward the stairs, toward me. And he saw me. I know he saw me, because he laughed.

"It was different from the other laugh. A soft, horrible little chuckling. And I ran. I ran back to my room. I locked the door. And the footsteps came nearer and nearer. They stopped at my door. He shook the handle. He shook and shook it. Then he laughed again, and he went away down the passage. I heard him banging and slamming in all the other rooms. He even went to the attic. Then at last he came downstairs again. I heard the back door shut and the car drive away. I—"

The horror story dissolved into sobs.

Gently Martin Field said, "Bernard, George, and Ramona. You're sure you don't know anyone by those names?"

"No. I told you."

"And you haven't any idea what all this could be about?"

"No, no. Unless—unless it was Evangeline."

"Evangeline?"

"My granddaughter. Her mother died when she was a baby. Sylvester and I tried to bring her up right. So did Miss Van Loon. She loved her just like her own daughter. But Evangeline was always bad. Willful, disobedient, thinking she could sing that cheap jazz music, sneaking off to night clubs. And then—"

Mrs. Twing's voice had changed. It had become prim and self-right-

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eous. Like her son's voice? Martin wondered. "Two years ago Miss Van Loon found her, right here in this house, with a man. There was a terrible scene. Miss Van Loon and Sylvester told her to leave and never come back. And they were right, of course. They were strict, both of them, but they were always right. But Evangeline was mean. Maybe she did it. Maybe she sent that terrible man in revenge. Oh, that laugh, that dreadful laugh!"

She had forgotten Martin now, caught up in a new surge of remembered terror. There was a lot more to ask, but it could wait. Quietly he slipped out of the room.

Mrs. Twing had said that this fantastic, laughing murderer had gone "slamming and banging" into all the other rooms. He made a tour of inspection. In every bedroom the covers and sheets had been ripped from the heavy, mahogany beds. In one room there were no sheets at all. In another, they had been torn into ribbons and scattered around on the faded plush carpet.

He stood, looking at the havoc, awed as one always is by the evidence of madness.

One of the detectives came in. "Telephone, Mart. Headquarters." He whistled. "Boy, what's this—a maniac?"

"That's right," said Martin grimly. "A maniac. Looks like this is the worst case we've ever had."

He took the telephone call downstairs. It was the sour voice of the sergeant at the switchboard. "Seems this is Homicide Day, Mart. Another report just come in. Newlands Gallery on Powell. The owner's been shot. Guy by the name of Bernard Olin."

"Did you say Bernard?"

"Yeah. Bernard Olin."

Martin felt a chill run up his spine. "I'll handle it. Send a couple of boys over there right away. I've got to leave this squad here."

"Sure, Mart. Anything else?"

"Yes. Check all asylums, mental homes, for an escaped lunatic."

You must have known I'd be back sooner or later. This time I've come to get you all, Sylvester—you, Bernard, George, and Ramona.

Sylvester, Bernard—

He took Dr. Casey with him, leaving one of the detectives in charge, with instructions to search for tire tracks at the back of the house, and to find some neighbor or friend to take care of Mrs. Twing. It was only when he passed his own apartment on the way to Powell Street that he remembered his sailing date with his nephew. His old black sedan was parked outside the house. That meant Rickie was still waiting for him.

Rickie was younger than Martin. His parents, Martin's brother and his wife, had been killed in an automobile accident. From then on Martin had raised and educated him. Since Rickie's return from Korea a couple of months ago Martin knew he had been fussing over

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his nephew like a hen with one chicken. He was ashamed of himself, but he couldn't change. Rickie was the only person he'd ever found time to love.

He swung the police car to the curb and climbed to the apartment. Rickie was in the attic-studio which Martin had kept for him during his two-year army stretch. He was at his typewriter, revising his article on ghost mining towns which had kept him stubbornly occupied since his return from a recent camping trip in Nevada.

"Hi, Mart. What happened? Get tangled with a corpse?"

"Two of them," Martin explained. It was his admitted and dearest wish to get Rickie interested in police work. The boy was crazy about his writing now, but freelancing could be tough, and Martin had hopes that he would win his nephew over in the end. "How about coming along? Maybe you could write something on police procedure."

"More propaganda, eh?" Rickie's blunt, boyish face broke into a grin. "Okay. I'll come along. But don't think you've got me into uniform yet."

When they reached the new office building on Powell Street, a traffic cop was controlling a crowd of curiosity seekers who had gathered on the sidewalk. They pushed through into the foyer, where an elevator captain indicated a glass door marked NEWLANDS GALLERY. They entered a small reception room. Three detectives from headquarters were already there. With them were a girl and a young man.

The girl was blonde and very suntanned in a white dress that left her shoulders bare. Martin Field thought he had settled years ago for bachelorhood, but the girl's glowing skin and extraordinary, vivid face did something to him. As she came toward them he felt an undermining thrill of excitement. She looked distressed but controlled.

"I'm Anne Lyle. Mr. Olin's partner." She gestured toward the big, handsome young man with a sulky mouth. "This is Robert Hilton, one of our artists. I've been out at his place in Burlingame all day, helping him get his new canvases ready for a show. He drove me back here and— You'd better see for yourself."

Hilton put a possessive hand on her arm. "Baby, you don't want to go back in there."

"It's all right, Robert."

Anne Lyle shook her arm free and led them through a door into the gallery itself. It was very modern, with abstract paintings on the walls and groups of gaunt, distorted statues about the room. On the floor near the door lay a couple of elaborate old-fashioned gilt frames festooned with bunches of carved grapes. By the rear wall was a desk. In front of it, on the thick gray carpet, sprawled a plump man in a white suit.

There was no mad havoc to com-

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pare with the ripped sheets in the Twing house—only the huddled body by the desk.

"We found him the moment we came in." Anne Lyle's voice was not so steady now. "He's—he's been shot. Lorna Williams, his secretary, was here, too. Unconscious. She'd been hit on the head. We got a doctor from upstairs in the building. He's taking care of her in the office."

As Martin brushed past her, that quick, out-of-place thrill came again. It confused him and he resented it. He was a policeman on a job; he shouldn't be reacting like an irresponsible kid. He watched Dr. Casey drop down by the body. Bernard Olin, like Sylvester Twing, had been shot in the heart.

The desk was bare except for a gold lighter, an ashtray, and a pack of unfamiliar cigarettes. Martin picked the pack up. They were Marley's, an English brand. A door behind the desk opened and a man carrying a black bag emerged.

He said to Anne Lyle, "She's come around. She was hit quite hard, but there's no serious damage." His glance moved to Martin. "It's okay to question her. Go easy, though, and get her home to bed as quickly as possible."

Martin nodded to Rickie, and the two of them went into the office. A small, pretty girl with dark bangs was lying on a pink studio couch against the wall. When she heard them she twisted around. Her eyes were green, and startled.

"The police, Miss Williams," explained Martin.

She sat up, with a pale smile. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

Rickie gave her one and lit it for her. Her own hand was shaking.

"He's dead, isn't he?" she asked.

"He's dead."

She shivered. "I saw it. I saw the whole thing."

Martin's body tensed. "You actually saw the murderer?"

"Yes. Shall I tell it all?"

Martin nodded.

"This afternoon Mr. Olin sent me out to pick up some old frames he'd bought. I guess it was around four when I got back. I came into the reception room. The door to the gallery was half open. I was just going to go in when I heard a laugh."

So what he had been dreading was about to come! Martin moistioned his lips. "A laugh?"

"I can't really describe it, but there was something wrong with it. It was high and loud and—and there was a cackle in it, like a laugh in a horror movie. It startled me. I pushed the door open. Mr. Olin was standing by the desk, and in front of him, with his back to me, was the other man. It was Mr. Olin I noticed first, because I could see his face, and it was positively gray with terror."

She looked down at her hand as if she were willing it to stop shaking. "For a second I just stood there. Then the man started to speak."

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Her glance flashed up to Rickie and then to Martin. "What he said was crazy. He said, 'Why are you so surprised, Bernard? Didn't you know I'd come back? I've already killed Sylvester. Now it's you, George, and Ramona, and I'll be quits.' And right away there was a shot. I hadn't realized he had a gun. I could only see him from the back. Mr. Olin gasped and pitched forward. I screamed. The man spun around. That's when I saw his face. It—it was horrible! Gaunt, almost like a skeleton, with great, burning eyes. He came right toward me with the gun, and he'd started to laugh again. That's what made it so terrible. I tried to run away, but he grabbed my arm. I felt something hit me on the head and—"

She broke off. "It all seems so unreal now. I can hardly believe it happened."

"It happened, all right," said Martin grimly. "Tell me more about the man. How old?"

"Around thirty-five, I'd say."

"What color hair?"

"Brown, a kind of reddish brown. He was wearing a sports jacket—brown, I think. And slacks. But it was the eyes—the round, staring eyes and the laugh—"

"You're sure you'd never seen him before?"

"Perfectly sure. I'd never have forgotten that face."

Martin called headquarters and relayed the description. "Getting anywhere with the asylums?" he asked.

"Checked 'em all in the area, Mart. No inmate known to be missing."

"Check with L.A. Have the description slapped on the front page of every newspaper in town. We've got a homicidal maniac on our hands, and he's apt to be killing at least two more people unless we can stop him."

The sergeant's grunt was phlegmatic. "Sure, Mart. I'll get onto it right away."

Martin put down the receiver. "Miss Williams, have you ever heard of a Sylvester Twing?"

"Sylvester! The one he said he'd already killed? Has he—?"

"He's killed him."

Lorna Williams jumped up.

Martin put a steadying hand on her arm. "Did Olin know any Sylvester Twing?"

"No. I've never heard of the name."

"What about George and Ramona?"

"There are quite a few Georges—artists, clients. But no Ramona."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. And I've worked here five years. If there'd been anyone I'd have known."

"Was Olin married?"

"No. He lived alone."

"Perhaps Miss Lyle might help?"

"It's Mrs. Lyle. No, she won't be any help. She only bought her partnership a few months ago. She'd never been a friend of Mr. Olin's.

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She was Robert Hilton's friend, and mine. We went to school together."

Urgency and frustration were warring in Martin now. He was obviously up against something from the past, some murky secret buried deep in all these lives, which linked them together and linked them to the Laughing Man. As persecutors, perhaps, with a victim who had finally turned on them?

But unearthing the past took time. What time did he have, with a mad murderer who had already struck twice in two hours, and two more corpses to come?

He went to the door. Anne Lyle and Robert Hilton were standing together silently while the detectives worked over the gallery. He nodded them toward the office. Behind him, he heard Lorna Williams give a little sigh. He turned just in time to see Rickie catch the girl as she collapsed.

He said to Anne Lyle, "We'd better get her home. Where does she live?"

"On Jefferson Street, down by the Yacht Harbor. She had some trouble and had to give up her apartment. She's staying with me until she can find another place."

"You come along, too . . . Rickie, carry Miss Williams out to the car."

Martin hurried back into the gallery. Dr. Casey was packing his bag. "Looks like the same gun, Mart."

"Sure, it's the same gun." Martin turned to one of the detectives. "Talk to the elevator men, to anyone who might have been around. Find out whether any of them saw a thin, reddish-haired guy around thirty-five, gaunt-faced, crazy-looking. Let me know right away."

He asked Anne Lyle for her telephone number and left it with the detectives. Rickie had carried Lorna through the excited crowd into the back of the police car.

Robert Hilton was following, with his hand on Anne Lyle's bare arm. The artist's face was stubborn and proprietary. "I've got my car here, Inspector. Okay if I bring Mrs. Lyle?"

"Okay."

Reporters started to press around Martin. He gave them a full report. He knew that it would place him under the heaviest press fire of his career. But the more publicity the Laughing Man got, the better the chance to stall any other killings.

He left the reporters dashing off for telephones, and swung the car, after Hilton's, up the great hump of Nob Hill. As they reached its peak and plunged down the other side, the glimpse of the Bay, calm and blue ahead of them, tied up absurdly in his mind with Anne Lyle's suntanned skin and soft yellow hair. He and she were together in his star-boat. The sail was flapping in a lazy summer breeze . . .

"What's the matter with me?" he thought disgustedly.

Anne's apartment was on the top floor of a little white mission house which looked over the Yacht Har-

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bor. Rickie carried Lorna Williams into Anne's bedroom. Then he joined Martin, Anne, and Robert Hilton in the living room.

Martin was questioning Anne Lyle. It wasn't helping. Three months ago, she explained, she had separated from her husband, Renshaw Lyle. Martin had heard of him. He was one of the best-known society philanthropists in San Francisco, head of many charity committees, a director of the Art Museum and of the Opera.

Anne had had a little money of her own and, because she was asking no alimony in the pending divorce, she needed to earn her living. She had always been interested in modern art. When she had heard from Hilton and Lorna that Olin was looking for a partner with some capital, she had jumped at the deal. But she knew practically nothing about Olin's personal life except that he was a notoriously honest, able, and respected dealer.

Robert Hilton had nothing useful to offer. Nor had Lorna when Martin interviewed her again for a few minutes in the bedroom. Olin, she said, had come into the office around eleven that morning. He had seemed perfectly normal. He had dictated a few routine letters, which she had mailed as she went out to lunch.

When she got back Olin had gone out to eat, himself. He'd returned about three, and at around three thirty had sent her out for the frames. There'd been no visitors to the gallery that day, because it had been closed to the public in preparation for a new show.

The telephone by the bed started to ring. Martin picked it up. It was the detective from the Newlands Gallery.

"No one seems to have seen the guy, Mart, but it's pretty hopeless. Thousands of people go in and out of this building every day. The elevator captain did talk with Olin, though, when Olin was going out to lunch. He says Olin seemed in an extra good humor and kidded with him. He had a letter in his hand. He mailed it while he was talking to the captain."

Martin cupped the receiver. "Miss Williams, you're sure you mailed *all* the letters that Olin dictated?"

"Quite sure."

So there was another letter—one, presumably, that Olin had written when Lorna was out to lunch. It was something. Not much, though.

"Okay," he said into the phone. "Keep trying. I'll be back later, but I've got to take in the Twing house first."

As he started for the door Robert Hilton came in. "I'm leaving, Lorna. How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. But I thought you and Anne had a dinner date."

Hilton scowled. "She won't go. Says she's going to stay with you."

Martin eased past him into the living room. Anne Lyle was sitting with Rickie by the window. They

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were talking casually, but, watching them, Martin felt a sudden, quite inexplicable jealousy.

"Come on, Rickie." The words came out before he could stop them. "This is not a taffy-pull. There's a job to be done."

He drove furiously back to the Twing house. Rickie, at his side, seemed unaware of his change of mood.

"That Mrs. Lyle—she's a good-looking girl."

"Girls!" exploded Martin. "Don't you ever think about anything but girls?"

His nephew glanced at him with affectionate astonishment. "Hey, what's the matter with you?"

"Matter! With a lunatic on my hands, with two corpses, two more to come—and not a single clue! And all you can think about is a blonde—" Sudden shame overcame him. He grinned at Rickie sheepishly. "Sorry, boy."

Rickie patted his arm. "That's okay. Policemen have a right to be temperamental. Just wait till I'm a traffic cop. I'll have all Market Street in a frenzy."

Martin was mollified. "You really think you'll come in?"

"Don't worry. If this is a typical policeman's day, you'll get me yet."

There were three other cars parked with the police car outside the forlorn old house on Jubilee Street. Martin hurried with Rickie into the hall. The detective he had left in charge was talking harriedly to a group of reporters. He left them and went with Martin and Rickie into the dining room.

"Hey, Mart, is it on the level what those newspaper boys are saying—that these two killings tie together?"

"They tie together, all right."

"A laughing maniac running amok! Boy, are we going to take a beating if we don't clean this up quick." The detective looked awed. "Nothing much here. I searched the alley in back, but it's paved. No sign of any tracks. No neighbors. No one to have seen anything. Only thing I found in the house was this." He tilted a cigarette butt out of an envelope. "The old lady says Twing was death on smoking and drinking. I found it in a vase in the living room."

Martin took the butt. Printed across its tip was the word MARLEY'S. Olin smoked Marley's cigarettes. Mrs. Twing had said there'd been a visitor at nine thirty. A man. Olin hadn't shown up at the gallery until eleven. It looked as if at last he had a link.

Olin must have come here. To warn Twing of their great danger? Possibly. But the elevator captain said Olin had been in an extra good humor at lunchtime.

A thin, solemn man in a seersucker suit came in. The detective said, "This is Mr. Danvers from the Tyson Gallery. I asked him over to check the contents of the house to make sure there's nothing valuable."

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Martin nodded. "Where's Mrs. Twing?"

"Upstairs, packing. I raked up some dame, a Mrs. Ross, who works here as a laundress. She's come to take the old lady over to her place for the night."

Out in the hall the reporters besieged Martin. He eased them into the street and shut the door; then he sent Rickie with the art expert into the living room and hurried upstairs to Mrs. Twing's bedroom.

Mrs. Twing was fully dressed. Mrs. Ross, the laundress, was with her, putting a few things into a small suitcase. Mrs. Twing's groping hands had picked up a photograph from the table beside the bed. The moment Martin entered, she said, "So it's you, Inspector."

"How did you know it was me?"

"You can always recognize footsteps when you're blind."

Mrs. Twing was very different from the terrified little rag doll he had last seen. With most of her composure recovered, she looked alert and forbidding, much more like the kind of old woman who could stand by without lifting a finger while her son and Miss Van Loon threw her only granddaughter out of the house.

Martin glanced at the photograph in her hand. It showed an angular, tight-lipped old lady, sitting in the living room downstairs, beneath two pictures of shadowy interiors, with the stuffed Pekingese under its glass bell beside her.

"This is Miss Van Loon?"

Mrs. Twing stroked the frame respectfully. "It's all I have to remember her by. I always keep her picture."

"What about Evangeline's?"

The old lady's mouth tightened.

Mrs. Ross spun around. "Tell him, Mrs. Twing! Tell the Inspector what I told you." But she didn't wait for Mrs. Twing to speak. "Evangeline's mixed up in all this," she said. "I know it. I saw her!"

"You saw her?"

Mrs. Ross nodded vigorously. "Yesterday. I was bringing the laundry. Just Mr. Twing's shirts and things. I don't do the heavy work. Real early, it was. Around nine in the morning. I turned into Jubilee Street, and there was this girl hurrying down the steps from the house, with Mr. Twing standing there, watching her go."

"What did she look like?"

"She was wearing a white dress and a scarf over her head. That's about all I could tell. She ducked real quick in the other direction and around the corner. But I saw her."

Martin said to Mrs. Twing, "Did your son tell you a girl was here yesterday?"

"Sylvester never told me things unless there was a reason."

"And you didn't hear anything—voices, footsteps?"

"I guess maybe I was asleep."

"But I saw her," insisted Mrs. Ross. "And I said right out to Mr. Twing, 'So you've had a visitor.'

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He just looked at me and didn't say anything. He was always terrible close-mouthed. But he was acting kind of different. I never met Evangeline. She'd gone when I started to work here. But it's obvious it was her. Evangeline came back, trying to get money from Mr. Twing now he'd inherited the house and all. He wouldn't have anything to do with her, so she sent that man, that terrible laughing man—"

Martin cut in, "I'll need a photograph of Evangeline, Mrs. Twing. Have you got one?"

The old lady hesitated, and then gave a grudging shrug. "There's one in the bureau. Middle drawer. It's an old one."

Martin found the photograph. It was on its face at the bottom of the drawer. It showed a pretty, cheerful, brash-looking girl of around nineteen in a sloppy-joe sweater. Martin held it out to Mrs. Ross. "Is this the girl you saw?"

She looked at the picture intently. "Well, as I say, I didn't get a good look at her. It was mostly the white dress I noticed." Then she added indignantly, "But of course it was Evangeline! Who else could it be?"

Martin was silent. Could Mrs. Ross be right? Could all this link up through Evangeline? Sylvester had thrown his daughter out because of some man. What if the man was unbalanced? What if Evangeline had been wronged, too, either actually or in her lover's imagination, by Bernard Olin, by the unknown George, and the unknown Ramona? Could the lover, crazed with hatred, have launched an insane campaign of revenge?

"How old is Evangeline now, Mrs. Twing?"

"Twenty-three this August."

"And the man who got her in trouble—who was he?"

"I don't know anything about him. One of the men from those dreadful night clubs, I expect." Mrs. Twing's voice was icy. "I told you. Sylvester always kept unpleasant things from me. Sylvester took care of it all." Her lips started to tremble. "Sylvester was always so considerate, so good to his old mother. And now—" She began to whimper. "Oh, what's going to become of me now? I'm all alone."

"Did your son leave a will?"

"No, no. He never dreamed he'd die before me."

In that case, the property would go to his daughter, Evangeline. Maybe, when she heard about it, the girl would show up. Maybe.

As he left the room Mrs. Ross was comforting the old lady. "There now, Mrs. Twing, don't you worry so. Somehow it'll all work out."

Martin picked up Rickie downstairs and they drove to headquarters. The art expert's report on the contents of the living room had been emphatic. The furniture and pictures were from the worst period of Victorian decoration, mixed with a lot of fake European antiques

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which had obviously been foisted on Miss Van Loon by unscrupulous dealers.

Martin stayed at headquarters for half an hour, leaving Evangeline's photograph for release to the press and turning in a preliminary report on both murders. He drove, then, with Rickie back to the Newlands Gallery.

The boys there had unearthed nothing new. He called Anne Lyle and asked her if she had ever heard of an Evangeline Twing in Olin's life. She hadn't. Neither had Lorna. But the sound of Anne's voice, cooperative but quite impersonal, brought him that same, unwanted excitement.

He was tired, he told himself, and scared by a case that was getting hopelessly out of control. That's why he was developing this obsession about a girl he didn't know.

Back in the apartment, he insisted on cooking dinner. Since Rickie's return he had got into the habit anyway. It made a kind of family mood, something he'd never had since he was a kid. That night he hoped it would help him to relax. But it didn't.

I'm going to get you all, Sylvester—you, Bernard, George, and Ramona.

After dinner he went back to headquarters. He called Anne Lyle again, asking for a list of Olin's friends and acquaintances and every George he had known. She and Lorna gave him about twenty names.

He started calling them. Some of them, at first, thought it was a gag. None of them had heard of the Twings, or any Ramona, or any significant George.

Around midnight there were still a few names on the list, but it was too late to call any more. Martin went out and bought a paper. It was all there, screaming across the front page:

THE LAUGHING MAN, MAD MURDERER, KILLS TWO . . . MORE VICTIMS TO COME . . . WHO IS GEORGE? WHO IS RAMONA?

Evangeline Twing's picture was there, too, gazing cheerfully and rather vacantly out from under the headlines.

"Inspector Field," the story read, "has the toughest job of his career on his hands. At the moment he is baffled . . ."

Inspector Field was baffled, all right. And this had to be the case he'd picked to get Rickie interested in a police career!

When he got back to the apartment Rickie was asleep. Martin went to bed, too.

He awoke next morning at seven thirty. Rickie was still asleep. He didn't wake him. He drank some coffee and walked to headquarters. Most of the newsstands were already open. The Laughing Man, George, Ramona, Evangeline Twing glared at him from every headline. One had demanded:

WHEN WILL THE LAUGHING MANIAC STRIKE AGAIN?

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At headquarters it was even worse than he had expected. All night, reports had been pouring in. Panic-stricken women had heard mad laughter below their windows, on fire escapes, outside their bedroom doors. Dozens of people from all over the city had seen men with gaunt faces and staring eyes. Some had been sneaking down alleys; some had been hovering around street corners; some had been slipping out of obscure bars.

Every George and Ramona in San Francisco, it seemed, had been calling in, too, shaken by the memory of some guilty episode in their pasts, certain they were the next victims and pleading for police protection.

The idea of the Laughing Man had inflamed the city's imagination, and hysteria, sprouting like an army of weeds, was choking any chance for genuine information. Martin, grimly fighting his own anxiety, waded through the reports which were still deluging in.

There was no lead to Evangeline Twing.

None of the Laughing Man tip-offs made any sense. None of the Georges and Ramonas, chattering on the phone, seemed to have any connection with the case.

Martin started to help with the calls himself. There was a terrified Mexican woman, whose name was Ramona, gabbling unintelligibly in Spanish. There was a call from a man who had just seen the Laughing Man on the Oakland Ferry. Another call came a minute later from a woman who had just seen him in Golden Gate Park.

"Yes, lady . . . Okay . . . We'll check it, lady."

He slammed down the receiver. It shrilled again. It was a woman's voice, high with excitement. "I'm reporting the Laughing Man! He's been here. He's just driven away in a car. I heard the laugh. And it wasn't only me. The doorman heard it. A lot of us heard it!"

Skeptically, Martin asked the address.

"1400 Larchmont. Russian Hill. He must have been to one of the apartments. We didn't see him. We just heard the laugh as he drove away. We—"

Martin's shoulder was tapped. He glanced up. A detective, unshaven and haggard from lack of sleep, was standing behind him. "Another one, Mart."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. Just came in on my phone."

"Take this." Martin tossed him his receiver and ran to the other phone. "Inspector Field."

A man's voice said, "Come at once to 1400 Larchmont. There's been a murder."

"1400 Larchmont?"

"Yes. It's Renshaw Lyle. I just found him, shot in bed. I'm Joseph Crummit, his secretary. Some people in the building heard laughter. I think it was the Laughing Man."

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"Okay, we'll be there."

Martin dropped the receiver. Automatically he glanced at his watch. 9:18. He thought he'd been prepared for anything. But he felt as if he had been slugged. Renshaw Lyle! Anne Lyle's husband! Not a George or a Ramona.

The detective who had taken over his call hurried to his side. "Lady at an apartment house on Larchmont said a lot of them heard the Laughing Man, Mart. Looks like it's on the level."

"It's on the level, all right."

Dr. Casey wasn't in the building. Martin had a call put through for him to join him on Russian Hill, grabbed three exhausted detectives, and ran down to a police car.

As he sped through the busy morning streets, it seemed to him that he could feel morbid excitement and terror emanating from the crowded sidewalks. It was infecting him, too. Anne Lyle's husband! This thing was completely out of control now, spreading like a plague . . .

The apartment house at 1400 Larchmont was small and discreetly luxurious. A group of agitated men and women were milling in the lobby. They clustered around Martin, all talking at once.

"I heard the laugh . . . out in the street . . . as the car drove away . . . That laugh! Just to hear it made your flesh creep."

A dark, very neat young man with sensitive, almost delicate, features pushed through to Martin. With him was an old doorman. The young man said, "I'm Joseph Crummit. The doorman saw Mr. Lyle this morning. You may want him, too."

"Okay." Martin turned to two of the detectives. "Get all these people's stories and bring them up to me."

With the others he hurried into the self-service elevator. Joseph Crummit explained that Renshaw Lyle had flown to Chicago four days ago for a charity drive. He had planned to be away a week and had given his houseboy a vacation. He had left instructions with Crummit to come in every morning to feed his two Siamese cats and take care of the mail.

"I came today at 9:15, as usual. I didn't expect Mr. Lyle to be there. I found him—in the bed."

Martin listened in a mood of mounting frustration. Even the secretary hadn't expected Renshaw Lyle back in San Francisco. But the Laughing Man had known. How? Or had he just blundered in, intent on his mad revenge?

"Mr. Lyle came back because he'd got through his work in Chicago early. He told me." The old doorman's voice broke in, breathy with self-importance. "I was in the lobby when he come in this morning. Around eight. He said he'd slept bad on the plane and was going to spend the morning resting in bed. He asked me to bring up the mail

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as soon as it came. Around eight thirty I took it up. He opened the door in his pajamas. He was perfectly okay—just like usual. I asked if he wanted anything else. He said no. So I went down cellar to fix the hot-water heater that was on the blink, and then, around nine, that's when I heard the Laughing Man. Up in the street. That laugh! Crazy."

The elevator reached the penthouse. Joseph Crummit opened a door with a key. He led them through an enormous living room into a bedroom with a sweeping view of the Bay. In a canopied four-poster bed, with a newspaper, letters, and empty envelopes scattered over the wrinkled sheets, lay a man in pajamas.

He was about forty, with an ascetic, aristocratic face. Blood had stained the front of his pajama jacket from a bullet wound just above the heart.

Squatting on the window sill, watching the body from bored, impassive blue eyes, were two Siamese cats.

"This is just as I found him." Joseph Crummit was hovering. "I didn't touch anything. I called you at once."

Martin picked up one of the empty envelopes from the bed. It was addressed to Mr. G. Renshaw Lyle. He said to Crummit, "What was Lyle's first name?"

"It was George."

Martin felt close to despair. *George* Renshaw Lyle! There, from the beginning, had been the Laughing Man's George, and he had never got onto it.

Anger merged with his sense of defeat. Why in heaven's name hadn't Anne Lyle told him her own husband's name was George? He told the detective. "Call Mrs. Lyle. Tell her to come over right away."

He looked back at the body. Renshaw Lyle had been killed in bed. It was obvious that, if he'd had to get up to answer the door, he'd never have gone back to bed to let himself be shot. The Laughing Man must have broken in.

He went to the window. The cats jumped grudgingly off the sill. There was a sheer drop of six floors to the street. He investigated the apartment. The kitchen door was bolted on the inside. The door to the fire stairs was outside by the elevator. There was no possible entry except through the front door.

He said to the doorman, "You're sure Lyle closed the front door after he'd taken the mail from you?"

"Sure I'm sure. I saw him."

Then it had to be a key. The Laughing Man with a key! How could an avenging maniac from the past have a key to this apartment? Unless . . .

Martin went back into the bedroom, where Dr. Casey, who had just arrived, was bending over the body. Renshaw Lyle's keys were lying in a little heap of change on the highboy. Martin turned to Joseph

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Crummit. "Apart from Lyle, who had keys to this place?"

"The houseboy had a set. But he gave them to me when he went on vacation. There's no one else—except Mrs. Lyle."

"Mrs. Lyle?"

The young man's eyes became faintly malicious. "Mr. Lyle was divorcing her, you know. When she left, three months ago, she took her keys with her. I wrote to her, asking for them back, but—"

"I thought Mrs. Lyle was divorcing Mr. Lyle."

"Oh, that's the official story." Joseph Crummit shrugged. "Maybe it's indiscreet of me, but there was a question of Robert Hilton."

"The artist?"

"That's right."

Anne Lyle had a key. Anne Lyle, who had denied all knowledge of the Laughing Man. Anne Lyle, who was being divorced.

Disturbed by his own new thoughts, Martin picked up the scattered letters from the bed. There were four of them: a letter from the president of a musical society, a report from the Art Museum, a financial statement on a cancer drive, and a communication from a welfare headquarters in Washington.

He glanced at Crummit. "A busy man like Lyle would have more mail than this in four days."

"That's only today's. I've been taking care of it every day. The rest is all in the library on his desk."

"You were here yesterday?"

"I was. All morning. I'm an art historian and I'm preparing a book on Dutch painting. Mr. Lyle has a wonderful reference library. It's easier for me to do my work here."

"Did anything unusual happen yesterday morning?"

"Nothing out of the way. There were a couple of phone calls."

"What phone calls?"

"They were all business. Except one. A man called and wanted to speak to Mr. Lyle. I told him he was in Chicago for the week. He didn't leave a name."

"What time was this?"

"About eleven o'clock."

Martin turned to the doorman. "Do you remember how many letters you brought up today?"

The old man nodded. "I counted 'em. Five and a financial paper."

"Five? You're sure?"

"Sure."

Five letters delivered and only four on the bed. Martin searched the bedroom. He didn't find the fifth letter.

He had Joseph Crummit check the pile of earlier mail on the desk in the library. The young man was certain that no letter had been added. So the fifth letter had disappeared. The Laughing Man must have taken it.

Martin's mind jumped back. Yesterday Olin had mailed a letter which he hadn't shown to Lorna Williams. Had Olin been the man who had called Lyle and hadn't left his name? Had the missing let-

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ter been written by Olin—to warn Renshaw Lyle, as perhaps he had gone to warn Sylvester Twing?

There was a ring at the front door. The detective went to answer it, and Martin heard Anne Lyle's voice. He turned, to see her coming into the living room. She was wearing white again and, in the morning sunlight slanting through the window, she seemed to him dazzling.

As she hurried toward them his new, unformed suspicion spilled out as anger. "Why didn't you tell me your husband's name was George?"

"If only I'd thought! We always called him Rennie. No one in the world ever called him George. And then you were only interested in friends of Bernard's. Rennie never knew Bernard. He hated modern art. He was only interested in Old Masters. He and Bernard never even met—" She broke off. "Is it the Laughing Man?"

"It's the Laughing Man, all right," Joseph Crummit cut in.

"But what could Rennie have had to do with all—all that horror, Inspector? He was the kindest, the most civilized man in the world. And he never knew the Twings; he never knew anyone called Ramona. I'm sure of it." She glanced at Crummit. "Did he, Joe?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Martin took her into the bedroom. Dr. Casey was still there. The cats were lying sprawled on the rug at his feet.

Anne stood at the end of the bed, her face drawn with grief and bewilderment. "Poor Rennie."

Martin said, "I understand you've got a key to his apartment, Mrs. Lyle."

"A key?" She turned. "Oh, yes, I think I have. When I left I always meant to mail it back, but I forgot."

"Where is it?"

"Home. At my apartment."

"Who else had a key?"

"Only Rennie and the houseboy. Joe never had one . . . Why do you want to know?"

"Your husband's murderer let himself in with a key." Martin avoided looking at her. "I think we'd better go to your place and make sure your key's still there."

He told the detective to take a full report from Crummit. "I'll be back later. Call me at Mrs. Lyle's if you need me."

As he and Anne Lyle went toward the door one of the detectives from downstairs hurried in.

"We've checked all the Laughing Man stories, Mart. They all saw the same thing, but it isn't worth a plug nickel. No one saw him or even heard him in the building. It was outside in the car. They heard the crazy laugh, and some ran to the window. They saw a car drive away. One of them says it was a navy-blue coupé, someone says it was a black sedan, someone else swears it was a dark-green job. Same old routine. Anyway, he drove away in a car."

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Martin took Anne down to the lobby. The reporters had arrived. When they saw him, they swarmed around him.

"So he got George, Inspector, right under your nose . . . Sylvester, Bernard, George . . . Three down, one to go . . . Inspector, what's the odds on Ramona now?"

He pushed through them to the police car. Hysteria would mount. Bitter attacks on police inefficiency—his inefficiency—would flock in. To Martin, who had nothing in his life but his work, this feeling of personal failure was almost unbearable.

As he swung the car down Hyde Street, he was maddeningly conscious of Anne sitting close beside him in the front seat. He fostered his anger against her. "Yesterday you told me *you* were divorcing your husband."

"That's right."

"Why?"

She flashed him a quick, faintly surprised look. "That's fairly easy to answer. I wasn't in love with him. I never really had been."

"Then why did you marry him?"

"Oh, I thought I was then. That was three years ago. I was very young. Both my parents had died and left me a little money. I was studying painting here and I met Rennie at the Museum. I guess I was lonely and overwhelmed by the fact that someone so important could be so kind and—so obviously in love with me."

She paused. "I did a good job of kidding myself. It took a long time before I realized I was just letting myself be loved, grabbing everything, and giving nothing. It was hopelessly one-sided, and Rennie deserved something better. One day I had it out with him. It made him unhappy. I don't think he ever really understood. He thought there must be someone else."

"And there wasn't?"

"No. I don't seem to be very good at falling in love."

"What about Hilton?"

"For heaven's sake, no!"

"He's in love with you."

She shrugged. "That's just his romantic schedule for the summer. Robert makes a hobby of falling in love. Oh, I'm fond of him. I think he's a good painter. But there's absolutely nothing—" She broke off. "Why do you want to know?"

"Joseph Crummit told me your husband was divorcing you because you'd been having an affair with Hilton."

Martin had expected, half hoped, that she would be indignant or at least embarrassed. She merely looked resigned.

"Joe probably believes it. He's a distant cousin of Rennie's, you know. His only living relative, in fact. He's immensely family-proud. He never thought I was up to the Lyle level."

"Your husband was very rich. Who inherits?"

"I don't really know. Some of his charities, I expect."

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"Not you?"

She flushed slightly. "If I do, I certainly won't accept anything."

"Why not?"

"When you've given someone nothing, you don't accept things from him." She turned suddenly to look at him. "You understand that."

"Why me?"

"Because you'd be the same way yourself. You're not someone who would take anything on false pretenses."

That remark, so unexpectedly intimate, threw him off his guard. He turned the car into Jefferson Street. As they passed the Yacht Harbor he saw his own star-boat bobbing placidly among the other moored craft. The sight of it brought the fantasies of the day before crowding back. He and Anne, out together in the Bay with the tang of the salt air and the wide blue sky.

In spite of himself, an improbable elation took possession of him . . .

Robert Hilton opened the apartment door for them. His handsome face was taut and anxious.

"Anne, baby, I called to ask Lorna how she was. She told me about Rennie. I came right over." He added urgently, "Is it the same guy that killed Bernard? The Laughing Man?"

Anne gave a weary little nod. "Inspector, do you want me to bring you the key? It's in the bedroom."

"I'll come with you."

He went with Anne into the bedroom. Lorna Williams, looking pinched and pale, was lying in bed.

"Anne, is it true?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Oh, Anne, I'm so sorry. But Mr. Olin never knew Rennie. I'm sure of it. He told me so when you bought the partnership. It's all just —crazy."

Anne had opened the lid of a little leather jewel case on a dresser. She turned suddenly. "The key isn't here!"

Martin took a quick step forward. "You're sure that's where you left it?"

"Quite sure . . . Lorna, you never saw my key to Rennie's apartment, did you?"

"No. I'd even forgotten you had one."

Here it was at last: a definite link between these people and the Laughing Man, a definite justification for suspicion. Anne Lyle's key!

The implications were terrifying. If the Laughing Man knew enough to search for a key in Anne Lyle's apartment, then he wasn't just a vague, shadowy figure from the past. He was at least an acquaintance, someone who was an intimate enough part of Anne Lyle's life to be—what? A clever murderer hiding behind madness? With an accomplice?

Martin thought suddenly of the girl in the white dress whom the laundress had seen leaving the house on Jubilee Street. A white dress. Anne's white dress?

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The telephone by the bed rang. Lorna picked it up, and handed it to Martin. "For you."

The call was from the detective at Renshaw Lyle's apartment. "Mart, headquarters just called. They want you. They've got a lead on Evangeline Twing."

"Send one of the boys over here." Martin dropped the receiver and glanced at Anne. "Turn this place inside out. Make sure the key isn't here. There's a detective coming around. Give him a full statement."

Anne's face was distraught. "But I don't understand. How could the Laughing Man—?"

"That's something I'd like to know, too, Mrs. Lyle," Martin said grimly. "But some other time. Right now I've got to get out of here."

Martin drove recklessly back to headquarters. In his office he found Rickie. The sight of his nephew made Martin feel even more ashamed and conscious of failure. But Rickie's affectionate smile was encouraging.

"Hi, Mart. Why didn't you tell your eagle-eyed aide that the whole town was apart? When I woke up, I called here and they told me about Lyle. I've been waiting over an hour to report for duty."

A policeman came in with a tall, hard-boiled redhead. "This is Miss Amory, Mart. She called about Evangeline Twing. We had her come right over."

Miss Amory studied the two men appraisingly. "Which is the Inspector?"

"I am," said Martin.

"The girl in that newspaper picture. Evangeline Twing. She's sure lived since that shot was taken, but it's the same girl, okay. Never can fool me on a face. She was in the show with me about a month ago at a strictly unclassy joint, name of The Gold Mandarin. She was a torch singer. Did a Mexican act that was about as Mexican as Limburger. Used a different name, though."

She grinned. "And this is the part that's going to slay you, Mister. The name she wore—and it was about the only thing she did wear—at the club was Ramona. Ramona Gonzales."

Evangeline—Ramona. Yes, it was all fitting together. "Where's The Gold Mandarin, Miss Amory?"

"In one of the alleys off Columbus Avenue. Bentley."

Martin turned to Rickie. "Come on."

They drove through the crowded, gaudy streets of Chinatown. To Martin the miasmic infection of the Laughing Man seemed to lurk even here, among the impassive Oriental faces, the shoddy trinket stores, and the fluttering banners with their hieroglyphic inscriptions.

But for the first time he was a jump ahead of his adversary. Ramona and Evangeline were the same person. He had been right from the beginning in deciding that

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the whole mad massacre had its roots in the Twing family. But not, as he had thought with Evangeline as the Laughing Man's partner.

Evangeline was another intended victim. And a victim who, with any luck in the world, would be able to reveal the whole mystery—if he could save her in time.

The Gold Mandarin, tucked away in its dim little alley, was closed. Martin's banging on the door brought a wizened old Chinese who took them into a dark bar with its tables stacked untidily in a corner. A suspicious, unshaven proprietor appeared, wrapped in a grimy bathrobe.

"Ramona Gonzales? Phony Mexican? Sure. But she don't work here no more."

"Where can we find her?"

"Don't ask me." The proprietor shouted, "Shirley!" He explained to Martin, "Shirley hires the acts."

A tough, middle-aged blonde with her hair in curlers came in through a rear door.

"Shirley—the cops," the proprietor said. "They're looking for Ramona Gonzales. Remember? Phony Mexican tomato?"

"Mexican, Chinese, from Mars, they're all alike to me. But I got their addresses in the book." The blonde went behind the bar, fumbled, and produced a dogeared black notebook. "How long ago, mister?"

"About a month."

Her magenta fingernails flicked the leaves. "Yeah. Ramona Gonzales. Fillmore." She gave the number.

Within ten minutes Martin and Rickie were at the house on Fillmore Street. It was a gabled monstrosity, converted into a rooming house and well on the road to decay. Children were playing and screaming outside the drab front door. A fat landlady in a stained apron waddled out from the shadowy depths of the hall.

"Ramona Gonzales? Top floor rear."

"Is she in?"

The landlady shrugged. "I should know. I got more important things on my mind."

With Rickie following close behind him, Martin turned and hurried up the moldy, peeling stairs. From one of the rooms came the sound of shrill, quarreling voices. A girl in a peacock-blue bathrobe, with a towel slung over her shoulder, was shuffling down a passage toward an open bathroom. She glanced at them shrewdly.

"Ramona Gonzales?" asked Martin.

The girl jerked upward with her thumb. 'But she's not there. I went up yesterday to bum a pair of stockings. Went up again today. The door's locked."

Martin nodded to Rickie. They started running up the stairs. They reached the top floor. Martin banged on the rear door. There was no answer. He banged again. With a feeling close to despair, he rammed his

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shoulder against the door's frail woodwork. On a second try, he forced it open.

He stepped into the room, with Rickie close behind. Instantly he saw what he had been dreading to see. A girl was slumped across the old iron bed. Her feet dangled limply over the edge of the bed.

He crossed to her. She might have been Evangeline Twing. She might have been anyone. You couldn't tell any more, because her face was purple and bloated from the pressure of fingers which had throttled her.

"Dead!"

Dimly Martin heard Rickie's startled exclamation through the pain of utter defeat.

Sylvester, Bernard, George, and Ramona. The dreadful murderous pattern had worked itself out. All four of them were dead, and he hadn't been able to do a thing to stop it.

He forced himself to think, automatically, like a machine. Ramona had obviously been dead for some time. Just a glance at her told that. The girl downstairs said the door had been locked yesterday. So Evangeline Twing had been murdered — when? Yesterday? The same day as her father and Bernard Olin?

"Wait here, Rickie. I'm going to talk to the landlady."

As he hurried down the stairs, lodgers started to come out of their rooms. They must have heard him break down the door. They followed him. When he found the landlady in the kitchen, there were three girls, an old man, and a little boy crowding in behind him.

The news of Ramona's death brought an excited babble. But it soon became apparent to Martin that there was no help here in this disorganized household, where people came and went oblivious of one another's activities.

No one had seen the Laughing Man.

No one had the slightest knowledge of Evangeline Twing's personal life.

The only tip-off came from the girl in the peacock-blue bathrobe. "Go see Maisie Roland. She was Ramona's girl friend. Snazzy apartment over on California."

Martin called headquarters, ordered a squad to come at once, then ran upstairs to Rickie. "Stay here until the boys come, Rickie. Don't let any of the mob in. See you later."

He drove to Maisie Roland's address and found her in. She was a tiny, expensive blonde, in an apartment which obviously cost more than she could be expected to afford. She offered Martin a drink and, when he refused, mixed one for herself. She curled up in the corner of a couch.

"Ramona murdered! But how terrible." She arched her eyebrows in dainty dismay. "Of course, she was no real friend of mine. But I was sorry for her. I'm a night club artiste myself. I was on a show with

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her and—well—I felt the poor girl needed a few refined contacts."

"Did you know her real name was Evangeline Twing?"

"No, but I knew it wasn't Ramona. She was always talking about her father. She was very bitter about him. He was so stingy, so stuffy, so harsh. There was an old lady, too, Miss Van Something-or-other. They'd thrown her out of the house."

"Do you know why?"

Miss Roland delicately fingered the pearls at her throat. "It was some man. She was bitter about him, too. He'd let her down as well. Whenever anything went wrong, Ramona always blamed the man. If it hadn't been for that heel, she said, she'd be sitting pretty today. And not only that . . ."

"Yes?" Martin encouraged.

"Well, I mean, there were times when she got real grand and mysterious, and she'd say, 'To think of me, a phony señorita singing for peanuts—and I might have been rich.' And once, when she'd had a couple of drinks here, she said, 'That old dame was real stuck on me. I was to get the old Van Something-or-other heirlooms. She told me privately. It was all set. And then, just because that heel had to get fresh right there in the house, and the old lady found us, out I went without a nickel. And after that, after I'd lost my chance, he left me flat.' . . . It was something like that. I didn't pay much attention. Those show girls! They've all got their hard-luck stories."

Evangeline might have been rich! She had been all set to get the Van Loon heirlooms. Heirlooms! And her lover had left her flat—after she'd "lost her chance." After Miss Van Loon had cut her out of her will?

So her lover had known about the heirlooms. There was a man who had known there was something of great value in the Van Loon house; something about which the cautious old Miss Van Loon might have kept quiet, so that even Sylvester Twing had never guessed its true value!

Martin felt the stirring of excitement. The art expert had found nothing but junk in the old house on Jubilee Street. But if there had been something valuable, the Laughing Man would certainly have stolen it when he had killed Sylvester.

The Van Loon heirlooms! Jewels, maybe? Or pictures? Olin was an art dealer. Lyle had been a director of the Art Museum.

Yes, pictures. That's what the Laughing Man could have been after.

The Laughing Man! The *so-called* Laughing Man. For, if it had all happened that way, Martin's earlier suspicions were justified. This murderer was no maniac.

He said urgently, "Miss Roland, what was the name of this man who let Ramona down?"

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Maisie Roland pouted her pretty mouth in a rueful grimace. "Mercy, I can't remember. Ramona was always using it. Was it John, Dick, Bob, Bill? One of those common names." She got up and crossed toward him. "You poor policeman! Why don't you have a little drink and relax?"

Paintings! Yes, that's what it must be.

Martin rose abruptly. "Sorry, Miss Roland. Some other time."

He drove to headquarters, picked up the key to the Twing house, and hurried on to Jubilee Street. The moment he stepped into the dim, pink radiance of the Twing living room, his eye fell on the stuffed Pekingese under its glass bell and the two pictures behind it.

As he crossed to the pictures he felt the excitement pounding in him. They were dark, old still lifes of fruit in baskets, the same pictures that had been hanging there when Sylvester Twing's body had been slumped beneath them. But . . .

His memory sped back to the photograph of old Miss Van Loon, which he had seen in Mrs. Twing's hand. It had been taken in this very corner of the living room. He was sure of that. The Pekingese had been sitting on exactly the same table.

But in Miss Van Loon's photograph the two pictures on the wall behind had not been of fruit in baskets; they had been interiors of rooms.

He took one picture off the wall, and then the other. His excitement soared to triumph. Behind each picture was a lighter square where the old red wallpaper had not become darkened by dirt. But the light squares were not as big as these pictures. Until recently, therefore, two smaller paintings must have been hanging there. The still lifes had been put up in their place.

By the Laughing Man, of course. The Laughing Man had stolen the original two when he had murdered Sylvester Twing.

With a sudden flash of insight Martin thought of the ripped and scattered sheets. The sheets from one bed had been missing. Like Mrs. Twing, he had taken it for granted that the Laughing Man was an unreasoning maniac. But how would a clever murderer smuggle paintings out of a house in broad daylight? He could wrap them in sheets, disguising them as a bundle of dirty laundry.

He ran upstairs. The sheets were still on old Mrs. Twing's bed. He checked the laundry mark: 37711.

But where had the murderer got the substitute pictures? Not from the walls, because they would have left telltale fade marks on the paper. And not from outside. He would not have come to kill Sylvester Twing with two paintings under his arm.

Then from where? From somewhere in the house that didn't involve a wall. The attic, maybe? He

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went up to the attic and searched through the clutter of objects.

Behind an old bedboard in a corner he found a large package. Its wrapping paper had been half ripped away. Inside were two pictures of fruit, like the pictures in the living room. But the wrappings were too large for just two paintings. This, then, was it. There had been four pictures. After the killing the murderer had unearthed the package and taken two of them to the living room.

He hurried downstairs and called headquarters. "Give me the Ross address—where old Mrs. Twing is staying."

When he got the address, he drove to the Ross'. Mrs. Twing and Mrs. Ross were there. He sidestepped their questions and asked to borrow Miss Van Loon's photograph.

The moment Mrs. Ross brought it to him he saw he was right. There were the two pictures behind the Pekingese. Two age-blurred pictures in heavy gilt frames festooned with carved grapes, showing women standing by windows in vague, foreign-looking rooms.

He drove back to headquarters. The news of Ramona's murder had broken. The place was a chaos of reporters, scurrying policemen, and the jangle of telephones. Martin called the Art Museum. "This is the police. It's urgent. I've got to have an expert identify a couple of paintings in a photograph."

While he was still on the phone, Rickie came in with the squad from Fillmore Street. The museum made an immediate appointment for Martin with the curator. Martin gave his nephew a brief, jubilant outline of developments and hurried to the museum.

He briefed the curator. "If I'm right," he said, "these pictures are responsible for four murders. They've got to be worth a tremendous amount."

The curator was studying the photograph. "I couldn't make a positive identification, Inspector, without seeing the paintings themselves. But if what you say is true, if these are genuine—" He glanced up with an expression of astonishment and awe. "They look very like Vermeers. And if they are original Vermeers, Inspector, they'd be worth at least five hundred thousand each."

"Who's Vermeer?"

"He was a very great Dutch painter."

Dutch! Miss Van Loon had come from Holland.

Martin turned to the door. "Thanks a lot. That's all I needed to know."

As he hurried out to the car, the whole thing was becoming as plain to him as a movie unrolling on a screen before his eyes. When Miss Van Loon had been fond of Evangeline, she had confided in her the value of the Vermeers, and had promised to leave her the pictures in her will. Evangeline had told her

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lover about them, probably to heighten his interest in her. Then had come the debacle. She had been thrown out of the house and lost her chance of inheritance.

She had lost her lover, too. But he had remembered the Vermeers and, as soon as Miss Van Loon died and left the house to the ignorant Twing, he must have realized his golden oportunity to pick up a fortune.

He must have gone around to Sylvester Twing . . . No, it couldn't have happened that way. The stern, Puritanical Twing would never have let his daughter's lover into the house.

As he swung the car into Market Street, Martin thought again of the girl in the white dress whom the laundress had seen leaving the Twing house on the day before the murder. No, Evangeline's lover would never have been able to approach Twing himself. He had needed an acomplice. The girl had gone to Twing, probably as a dealer offering to buy the two old pictures for a song. That had been the plan —a simple plan to get one million dollars for next to nothing.

But it had gone wrong. Why? Because Sylvester had been as shrewd as he'd been secretive, and had suspected a trap? Probably he had guessed something of the pictures' value. Wouldn't it have been in character for him to have stalled this girl, who had come from nowhere with a suspiciously casual offer, and to have called an art expert for an official assessment of the pictures' worth?

Bernard Olin, as a well-known dealer, was an obvious choice. So he had called Olin, and Olin had gone to his house. Olin, who was an honest man, had told Sylvester of the pictures' immense value. And—yes, of course. Olin had gone back to the gallery and called Lyle as a director of the museum, the most logical place to buy the pictures from Twing. He had called, and Joseph Crummit had told him Lyle was out of town. So he had written the letter, instead.

There it was, Sylvester was linked now with Olin, with George, and, of course, with Ramona, too. They were no longer mere names connected at random in a madman's threat. They were the four people who had stood between Evangeline's lover and the Vermeers.

The plan to plunder Sylvester Twing had turned, by necessity, into a multiple murder. And the accomplice? The girl in the white dress?

He had reached headquarters. He hurried out of the car and up to the squad room. As he crossed to his office, one of the detectives yelled to him, "Telephone, Mart. Urgent."

Martin picked up the receiver. It was Anne Lyle's voice, and it was trembling with anxiety. "Inspector! Thank heaven, you're there. Something terrible has happened. It's Lorna."

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"Lorna?"

"About an hour ago a man called me at home. He said he was one of the lawyers for my husband's estate, and that he had to see me at once. He gave me an address, 'way out on Bernal Heights. I came out here, but there's no such address. I'd written it down, but I'd left the paper at home. I thought I might have made a mistake, so I called Lorna. When she answered the phone she was almost incoherent with fear. 'Thank heaven, it's you,' she said. 'Call the Inspector. I can't go on any longer. I know. I've known everything all along, and now he's going to—' Then there was a scream and a shot, and a terrible mad laugh."

Anne gave a sob. "It's the Laughing Man! My call was just a blind to get me out of the apartment. Hurry! I'll be there as soon as I can, but hurry!"

Martin dropped the receiver, feeling shocked, and furiously angry with himself. Lorna Williams was now on the list of corpses. Of course. Why not? When Lorna Williams had obviously been the Laughing Man's assistant—the girl in the white dress who had been drawn in as a partner, only to end up as another victim.

With merciless clarity he thought back to the frames of the Vermeers in the photograph. They were heavy and gilded and decorated with bunches of grapes. So had been the frames in Olin's office, which Lorna claimed Olin had sent her out to collect. From the beginning the frames had been hidden in the most logical place for frames to be—in an art gallery.

It was clear as daylight now. But now was too late. What good were his theoretical triumphs, when they dragged so hopelessly behind the event? He stumbled, while the Laughing Man killed . . .

The Laughing Man . . . As Martin sped recklessly, but already resigned to disaster, toward Anne Lyle's apartment, the phrase echoed jeeringly in his mind. The Laughing Man. Anne Lyle had heard him laugh. All of San Francisco was babbling about the Laughing Man—the horror that stalked by night and day.

But the Laughing Man did not exist. The Laughing Man was merely a fantastic puppet, fabricated by a brilliant and terrifyingly sane murderer; a puppet built up by fooling a terrified old blind woman and intimidating an accomplice.

It was all quite clear. The ruse had been essential to the murderer, for if the true motive of the Vermeers had ever come out, the pictures would have become notorious and quite impossible to sell.

Everything, for the murderer, had hinged on keeping the existence of the Vermeers a secret. And what better screen than to invent an insane murderer from the past, returned to kill the four people who had wronged him; four people

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whose names could be announced to the police in such a way that they could be identified only *after* their deaths? Mad laughter and torn sheets to scare Mrs. Twing; a phony physical description from Lorna Williams, who had been knocked unconscious for veracity's sake; a single mad laugh from a car.

That had been all that was necessary. Just a few touches, and the newspapers, the public, had filled in the rest of the portrait.

Martin's anger had turned now to a cold hatred against this killer who had so completely outsmarted him.

He drew the car up outside the house on Jefferson Street. He went up to Anne's apartment. Even before he broke down the door he was prepared for what he saw: the crumpled body of Lorna Williams lying on the floor by the telephone.

And now, beyond his hatred, he felt a bitter, cynical calm. Okay. She was dead. At least, she'd deserved it more than the others. But the murderer had defeated him again.

He called headquarters, wearily conscious of his own humiliating position. "Another corpse. Come and get it if there's room in the morgue."

He looked down again at Lorna Williams, his mind ticking relentlessly on. When she'd tried to buy the pictures from Sylvester Twing she might have thought she had succeeded, but not for long. Next morning she would have known the plot had misfired when Olin came into the gallery with his triumphant news of the Vermeer discovery. Probably Olin had dictated to her his letter reporting the news to Lyle, but he had foiled her by mailing it himself.

Martin could visualize the scene with Lorna alone in the gallery, calling her "partner," warning him that the plan must stop. Twing and Olin knew of the existence of the pictures. Lyle would know as soon as he came back from Chicago and read Olin's letter. And there was always Evangeline Twing, who had known all along.

There were four people now who knew, or would soon know. It would be hopeless to go on.

But her partner hadn't thought it was hopeless. One million dollars was a prize too big to lose. With prodigious daring, he had switched from petty dishonesty to mass murder.

First, of course, he had killed Evangeline, the most dangerous of the four, because she knew about the pictures and also believed he was the only other person who was aware of their existence. Then he had killed Sylvester, created the Laughing Man in Mrs. Twing's panic-stricken mind, and stolen the pictures. After that he had driven straight to Olin's gallery and killed the dealer.

Martin could imagine Lorna Williams' terrifying dilemma. She was

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now a murderer's accomplice, whether she wanted to be or not. It was far too late to pull out. So she had had to go along with him, memorizing what he wanted her to say about the Laughing Man, and letting herself be knocked unconscious. And later she had had to keep silent, even though Renshaw Lyle was killed.

Martin saw now that, although Renshaw Lyle, as George, had been added as a precaution, he need not have died. If he had stayed in Chicago as planned, the murderer could have collected Olin's letter at the apartment and destroyed it before Lyle's return. But, by coming back unexpectedly and reading his mail, Lyle had signed his own death warrant.

Martin dropped to his knees by Lorna Williams' body. Faint pity stirred behind his hard veneer of bitterness. Why had she done it? What had happened to make an ordinary, decent girl get tangled with a murderer?

There was a sound behind him. He got up quickly, turned, to see Anne Lyle in the bedroom doorway. She gave a little wrenching sob and swayed.

Martin ran to her, putting his arms around her to steady her.

"She's dead. And it's all my fault! If I hadn't left her—" Anne whispered.

"You'd have been dead, too."

As he held her in his arms, Martin found himself pouring out the whole story to her. It was strange the way he was feeling. The bitterness was still there and the professional alertness, but, merged with them, was an odd sensation of peacefulness, as if one thing had ended and another was beginning.

"You knew her, Mrs. Lyle. How could she have got caught up in a thing like this?"

"I—I think I know. I told you she'd had to give up her apartment. There was trouble. She'd always been a crazy gambler. She took her vacation in Reno, and she met a man who had a system for roulette. They won enormously, and then they lost. Then they started to borrow, and went on and on until they were hopelessly in debt. She left her apartment because she was afraid—afraid the gamblers might catch up with her."

There it was, the motive, the desperate need for quick money.

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know. She never said."

It was obvious now. Lorna's gambling partner had been her partner in murder. He was also Evangeline's lover, Miss Roland's "John, Dick, Bob, or Bill—one of those common names."

But the task of finding Evangeline's lover seemed hopeless. He might be any man in the United States. Then Martin remembered the key. The Laughing Man could only be someone who had a key to Lyle's apartment.

Joseph Crummit had had a key

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and, as an art-historian working on a book about Dutch painting, he would have been the first to realize the Vermeers' value. Joseph—Joe. A common name.

And Robert Hilton! As a constant visitor at Anne's apartment he could easily have stolen her key. Robert Hilton was an artist, too. Robert—Bob . . .

A detective, two policemen, and Dr. Casey had arrived. Martin directed them into the bedroom. The Laughing Man, then, must be either Hilton or Crummit.

But in the whole intricate chain of killings, no shred of a clue had been left behind that would stand up in a court of law. Unless he could find the Vermeers in the possession of one of them, how could he possibly—?

The idea came to him with sudden swiftness, as an image rose in his mind of Mrs. Twing turning her sightless eyes on him as he walked into her bedroom.

So it's you, Inspector.

How did you know it was me?

You can always recognize footsteps when you're blind.

Footsteps! The peak of the old woman's terror had been the footsteps of the Laughing Man—the footsteps coming out of the living room, coming up the stairs toward her.

He turned to Anne. "You know Hilton's and Crummit's telephone numbers, don't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

Swiftly he outlined his plan to her. As she gave him the numbers, the phone rang. He picked up the receiver.

A man's voice, edged with excitement, said, "Is Mrs. Lyle there? Joseph Crummit speaking."

Martin handed Anne the phone.

"Yes, Joe . . . Oh, has it? . . . No, I can't right now. I'm with the Inspector. I have to go to his apartment . . . You do? . . . Hold on a minute."

She cupped the receiver. "It's Joe. Something to do with Rennie's will. Joe inherits a lot if I sign a waiver. It's just come in. He wants to take it over to your place so I can sign it right away. Shall I say yes?"

Martin nodded.

She spoke on the phone, then dropped the receiver. "He's coming."

Martin called Robert Hilton and told him, also, to come to his apartment. With Anne and one of the policemen, he drove to the Ross'. They found old Mrs. Twing rocking on the porch.

"Mrs. Twing, if you heard the Laughing Man's footsteps again, do you think you could recognize them?"

"Of course I could. Anywhere."

They drove her to Martin's apartment. Martin took her and the policeman up to Rickie's attic. It made an ideal trap, because a tall flight of bare stairs led to it from the apartment below. Martin stationed Anne downstairs.

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"When they come, send them both up to me."

He settled the old lady in a chair by the desk and the policeman near the door. He sat down, himself, on Rickie's bed near its head.

Now that the climax was coming, his nervous energy was burning out. He would win; he knew he would win. But it seemed to him that his victory was already tarnished beyond repair. Five people killed—who might have been saved . . .

He sat there, doggedly fighting his inner battle, glancing every now and then at Mrs. Twing who, perched in her chair, looked as grim as Fate.

Below them, the front-door buzzer sounded. Martin tensed, mechanically twisting the edge of the sheet in his fingers. He could hear Anne's voice faintly, and another voice. Then footsteps were audible on the stairs.

Martin's eyes were riveted on the old woman's face. "Listen, Mrs. Twing."

The footsteps came closer. The policeman by the door was moistening his lips. But Martin could see no change on the old woman's face.

"Mrs. Twing, are they the same?"

The old lady shook her head. "No," she said. "No. That isn't the Laughing Man."

As she spoke, Robert Hilton came into the room. "Inspector, you wanted to see me?"

"Not any more." Martin nodded to a chair. "Just sit and wait."

The buzzer downstairs sounded again; there were the muffled voices, and then the footsteps coming up the stairs. The old lady leaned forward a little. Martin watched her, waiting for the moment which, surely, would bring everything to an end. The footsteps were almost at the door . . . The old lady shook her head again.

"No," she said. "No, that isn't him."

"You're sure?"

"I'm absolutely sure."

The door opened, and Joseph Crummit, clutching a brief case, hurried in. "Mrs. Lyle sent me up, Inspector. What is it you want to ask me?"

Martin looked at him in total defeat. So much for the trap, which was to have redeemed him from humiliating failure. It was terrible at this late stage to have no plan any more, not even an idea.

"Mr. Crummit—" he began.

He broke off because footsteps were sounding once more on the stairs. They were coming swiftly upward and, in the same instant, Martin's eyes were caught by a sharp movement from Mrs. Twing.

She had sat up erect in her chair. Her blind eyes stared fixedly.

Slowly there spread over her face an expression of wonder and dark, remembered terror.

"That's him!" Her voice was shrill as a bird's. "He's coming. Those are the footsteps. That's him—that's the Laughing Man!"

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The door was flung open. With a cheerful smile on his face Rickie strode into the room.

For one moment, when all of time seemed suspended, Martin sat looking at his nephew. Then, as horror began to dawn on him, he dropped his gaze to his hands. He was still twisting the edge of the sheet. Dimly he was conscious of numbers inked onto the wrinkled linen: 37711.

The numbers were even more terrible to him than his nephew's smiling face. 37711—the Twing laundry mark, the mark on the sheets which had concealed the Vermeers.

He faced it, because it had been his training for so many years to face what had to be faced. Of course. Now it was pitifully obvious.

Robert Hilton was not the only person who could have stolen the key from Anne's bedroom. It was Rickie who had carried Lorna Williams into the bedroom; Rickie, who under cover of his interest in police work, had engineered that opportunity to get the key from Lorna . . .

"John, Dick, Bob, Bill—one of those common names." Dick—Rickie. Rickie, who had always had girls on his mind; Rickie, who had been Evangeline's lover, and had been told about the Vermeers two years ago before his stint in Korea; Rickie, who had been on a camping trip to Nevada—a "camping" trip which had ended up with Lorna Williams, a system for roulette in Reno, and a desperate need for quick cash.

As the chill bit deeper into him, he realized that he, himself, had been indirectly responsible for Lorna's death. Before he left for the museum, he had told Rickie about his discovery of the Vermeers. Rickie had known, then, that the truth was out and would tie up with the frames in the gallery. He had killed Lorna before police questioning would inevitably have made her confess.

Rickie's casual voice penetrated the darkness of his thoughts. "Hey, Mart, what is this—a party?"

Martin got up. His legs felt dead, as if he were standing on two tree stumps. He couldn't look at Rickie. He looked instead at the policeman by the door. "Okay, Fred. Handcuff him."

He saw the startled policeman move forward. He turned his back, then. His thoughts were still scraping at him like knives. Rickie hadn't even bothered to destroy the telltale sheets. He had been as sure of himself as that. There he had been, in the very heart of the police security zone. Who ever, in a million years, would have searched Inspector Field's apartment?

Then, if the sheets were here, the Vermeers . . . Like a zombie, Martin moved to the clothes closet.

Two pictures were propped against the wall behind the hanging

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suits. He pulled them out. He threw the Vermeers down on the floor. $1,000,000 worth of evidence.

He turned to Rickie. It needed all his strength but he managed it. He stood looking at the only human being he had loved. His nephew was handcuffed to the policeman, but he was still as unruffled as ever. Somewhere, in Martin, the love, which hadn't yet had time to die, felt a reluctant admiration.

In a voice that was almost a whisper he said, "How much did you owe those gamblers in Reno, Rickie?"

"More than a hundred thousand." His nephew made a jaunty little gesture with his hand. "Seems like I didn't get away with it, Mart. But —okay. It was a sporting chance."

A sporting chance! Killing five people—a sporting chance. Martin's incongruous admiration had gone now. He felt only contempt and a growing sense of horror that he could have lived so long with someone and have known him so little.

"Okay, Fred," he said to the policeman. "Take him away."

The machinery of the law was lumbering forward now. Martin's role was played out. He stood, looking down, forcing himself not to listen . . . One day, maybe, he would feel alive again.

A hand touched his arm. He heard a voice, soft, sympathetic. "I know how you must be feeling. I'm sorry."

He glanced up dully. Anne Lyle was watching him. "You did what you had to do," she said.

"Mrs. Lyle!"

A voice behind them made them both turn. Joseph Crummit was hovering with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "I hate to bother you. But if only you could sign the waiver now—"

Anne looked at Martin. "Shall I sign?"

He knew she was trying to distract him, to force him out of his bitter introspection. Beneath the pain there moved a faint, warm sense of gratitude.

"Sign," he said. "Remember what you said? You don't accept things on false pretenses."

Anne Lyle signed the paper with a pen eagerly held out to her by Joseph Crummit.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lyle," Crummit hurried out of the room.

Martin and Anne were alone. For a moment they stood looking at each other. Then, in a small, uncertain voice, Anne said, "Remember something else I said yesterday? I said I wasn't very good at falling in love. Maybe—maybe I was wrong."

Her hand moved toward him. He reached out and took it in his. Yes, one day he'd feel alive again. Already, incredibly, he was sure of it, because the sunny fantasies of the day before were stealing back.

He and Anne in the star-boat, in the Bay, with the sail flapping lazily in the breeze and the tang of salt in the air . . .

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BOX SCORE FOR 1962

In editing his first volume of the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR (published in July 1963 by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), Anthony Boucher selected 16 stories as the best short stories and novelettes of 1962, and listed 80 other stories in his Honor Roll—a total of 96 distinguished stories of which 9 were published only in books and 87 appeared in American magazines during 1962.

Here is the box score for the 87 magazine stories:

name of magazine	*number of Honor Roll stories*	*percentage*
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine	38	43.6%
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine	12	13.8%
The Saint Mystery Magazine	12	13.8%
Playboy	5	5.7%
Manhunt	5	5.7%
Cosmopolitan	4	4.6%
Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine	3	3.4%
Saturday Evening Post	2	2.3%
New Yorker	2	2.3%
Argosy	1	1.2%
Esquire	1	1.2%
Rogue	1	1.2%
Baker Street Journal	1	1.2%

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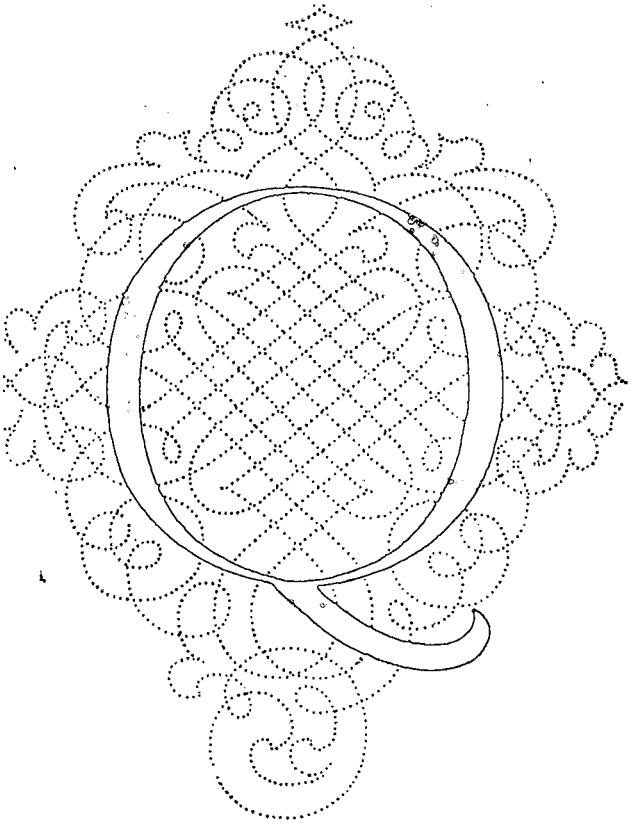

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